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RANCH ROMANCES

Scarlet Range

By FRANK GRUBER

First December Number

ROBERT DALE DENVER

AMOS MOORE

GARGLE LISTERINE . . . *at once*

Feel chilly? . . . Uneasy? . . . With just a hint of rawness and tickle in the throat?

Do something about it, quick! before there is actual pain in swallowing.

Don't Treat Symptoms Get At the Cause

The irritated throat-surface is usually the result of infection by germs. Help the system in its fight to repel these germs by gargling with Listerine Antiseptic.

Every one of these surface germs which it reaches is almost instantly killed by full-strength Listerine Antiseptic. It destroys not only one type of germ, or two; but any and all kinds which are associated with the Common Cold and Simple Sore Throat. And there are literally millions of such germs in the mouth.

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Many users report best results with gargling every hour. If the inflammation still persists, it is advisable to consult your doctor.

Seven years of carefully supervised medical research established the clear-cut finding that those who gargled regularly with Listerine Antiseptic had *fewer* colds . . . and got rid of them *faster* . . . than non-garglers.

This winter, why not make a test of your own case? Get a bottle of Listerine Antiseptic, *the safe antiseptic with the pleasant taste*. Keep it handy in the medicine cabinet. Use it regularly.

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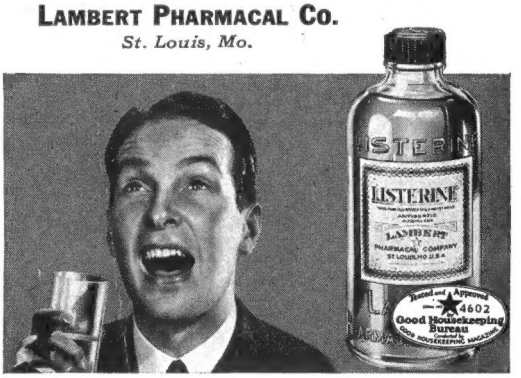

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NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.
BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time*

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Vol. LXXXIV

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 1

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FIRST DECEMBER NUMBER

SCARLET RANGE ..... Frank Gruber 7
A Complete Novel

A FOOL AND HIS DINERO ..... Robert Dale Denver 43

NEW DEAL FOR KATE ..... James W. Routh 55

OUTLAW COUNTRY ..... Amos Moore 66
A Gripping Serial of the West—Part One

AGGRAVATING COWHAND ..... Stephen Payne 85

JINNY COMES HOME ..... Eric Howard 97

RED McALLISTER GOES TO TOWN ..... Cole Kitson 106

PIONEER WOMAN ..... Olive King Dixon 117
A Lady of the Frontier Reminisces

CALAMITY RANGE ..... Paul Evan Lehman 122
An Absorbing Western Serial—Conclusion

THE WRANGLER'S PAGE ..... Walt Mead 131
What a Cowboy Has to Know

OUT OF THE CHUTES ..... Tex Sherman 132
The Rodeo Department

RANCH ROMANCES' AMATEUR PAGE ..... The Readers 134

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE 136

DEAD ACRES ..... A. F. Hopkins and R. E. Hovey 137
A Western Story in Cartoons

OUR AIR MAIL ..... The Readers 138
The Pen Pals' Pages

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL 142
The Club Page

WHOM SHALL I MARRY? ..... Professor Marcus Mari 143
The Horoscope Department

In the Second December Number

SIXGUN SENTENCE

A TENSE NOVEL OF FRONTIER LAW

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

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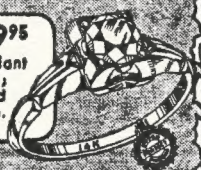

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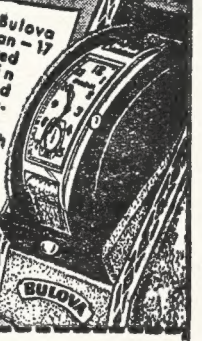

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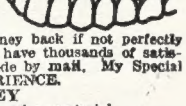

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Scarlet Range

By Frank Gruber

For years blood had been spilled on the green range of Lafayette County. The dreadful maelstrom of battle drew into its dark depths a girl who was willing to barter her future for peace and a man who demanded justice.

CHAPTER I

Rough Journey

THE HARDWARE drummer ate his frijoles with gusto and he drank his coffee noisily. The lean man in the Prince Albert with the black velvet collar cast a contemptuous glance at him now and then.

Across the table Stebbings, the coach driver, ate with elaborate indolence. He had been driving ten hours in heat that averaged well over a hundred degrees. The coolness of the adobe hut was a luxury that he intended to enjoy to the last second.

Beside Stebbings, Bob Westcott toyed with his food. He wasn't very hungry and the spiced frijoles were not to his liking. They did things to him—inside. So had ten hours in the jolting, crashing, plunging stage-coach. He wondered if he could last through the

final heat. He had to, of course, but it would be a struggle and the frijoles wouldn't help.

There was one other person at the table—a girl. A girl who seemed as out of place in this remote stage-coach station as a hardware drummer. She was young, twenty-two, perhaps, dressed in a black traveling costume. She was a tall, dark girl, with a great deal of reserve. All through the morning she had resisted the efforts of both the hardware drummer and the man in the Prince Albert to "get acquainted." She replied to their questions with the briefest of answers and during the last couple of hours had not spoken at all.

The drummer quaffed the last of his coffee and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, driver," he announced grandly. "I'm ready for the final dash."

"Umm," said Stebbings. "Got five minutes more. No hurry. I'm on schedule."

"No reason for anyone to want to get to Two Butte too soon," said the man in the Prince Albert. "Usually the hurry's in getting away from there."

The driver, Stebbings, looked at the lean man. "You been in Two Butte?"

"No, but I've heard enough about it. Who hasn't?"

"Yeah," jeered the hardware drummer. "I heard that stuff about it, too. It don't scare me none. A man gets knocked off and the city papers yell 'range war.' Hell, I bet I've seen worse fights in Denver and Kansas City than they ever had in this crossroads place they call Two Butte."

"If you have," said the man in the Prince Albert bluntly, "it must have been between the Confederates and the Union Forces. Mister, more'n forty men been killed in Two Butte in the last year."

"That's all over, though," said Stebbings a bit hurriedly. "The governor threatened to send in the troops and they made peace. Ain't been no trouble there now in three-four months."

The well dressed man was frankly skeptical. "But it's due to bust out again any day. From what I hear, Fred Ogden and Preston Parrish have been recruiting gunfighters."

"Parrish?"

Everyone at the table, including Westcott looked at the girl. This was the first time she's said a word since the journey had started without it being forced from her.

The lean man looked at her in astonishment. "You know Preston Parrish, Miss?"

"I've heard the name . . . somewhere." She seemed suddenly embarrassed, Westcott thought. To ease her embarrassment, and because he couldn't stand the smell of the hot food any longer, he got up and went out into the shimmering heat. The sudden change from the comparative coolness made him gasp. The gasp led to a choke and then he coughed wrackingly. He brought out a handkerchief and put it to his mouth.

After a minute or so he looked at his handkerchief. There was blood on it, not merely a fleck, either. He climbed into the stage-coach and leaned back. Things swam giddily before his eyes and he closed them. But he opened them quickly when he heard the others come out. The drummer and the man in the Prince Albert were still arguing.

"I'm not afraid of these Frontier gunfighters," the drummer was declaring. "They're a lot of bluff. They notch their guns to scare each other. I hear tell of a couple last year stood up ten feet apart and emptied their guns. And neither of 'em drew a drop of blood. Bah!"

Vince Sebastian had been more than fifty feet from Westcott. He had fired only once. That had been six months ago—and blood showed on Westcott's handkerchief today. Well, perhaps the drummer would encounter Sebastian in Two Butte—when Sebastian was mean drunk. He'd change his opinion of gunfighters.

Up on the box Stebbings' long whip cracked like a pistol shot. The six-horse team exploded into movement and the coach was whipped off to a flying start. It lurched so violently

that a groan was forced from Westcott's lips.

The girl who was sitting directly opposite Westcott suddenly spoke: "You're sick!"

Westcott sunk his teeth into his lower lip. A drop of blood seeped between them, stained his lips. "I'm all right," he said.

The man in the Prince Albert leaned across. "Sure? There's blood on your mouth. I noticed before that you weren't up to shakes."

"I had a bit of a siege in a hospital," Westcott said. "The trip's been a bit rough."

"You're telling me! Well, it'll only be a couple more hours to Two Butte. You're going there, aren't you? My name's Jeff Mosely. I'm going to work in Crocker's Bank. Perhaps you know Crocker?"

Westcott nodded slightly. "Yes, I know him. I'm glad to know you, Mr. Mosely. My name's Westcott. I—I live around Two Butte."

"You do?" piped up the drummer. "Then you can settle our argument."

"Mr. Papke insists that Two Butte is as quiet as a summer resort," said Jeff Mosely sarcastically. "So he's going there to sell the citizens some farming implements."

"I sure am," declared Mr. Papke, the drummer. "But tell us about this Two Butte. Did they really have a range war there? Mosely here says they knocked off forty-fifty men. I don't believe it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Papke," Westcott said. "I've been away from Two Butte for over six mouths. I don't know what they've been doing. I really couldn't tell you anything about it."

Papke looked triumphantly at Mosely. The latter shrugged and let the hardware drummer assume the technical victory. He lapsed into silence. Westcott, looking covertly at the girl, thought she settled back in the seat with relief.

The coach crashed on over the rough, rutted road. Every now and then a

BOB WESTCOTT

wheel hit a stone in the road and the occupants of the coach were jolted off their seats. Perspiration was streaming down Westcott's body. He gripped the window ledge with a white-knuckled hand and looked out over the parched country. His eyes were bright and his face gray.

And at last the stage-coach rolled into Two Butte, a cowtown consisting of a hundred buildings and one street; the county seat of Lafayette County.

The passengers climbed out of the coach. Papke looked around a thin fringe of men who had come to meet the stage and grinned at Mosely. "It don't look so wild to me," he said.

Stebbings dumped baggage out of the boot. Westcott picked up a limp carpet bag. He looked around and saw the girl standing by a growing heap of bags. He wondered why this girl was coming to Two Butte. There was a rather worried look on her face, now, as if she'd expected someone to meet her and the person hadn't showed up.

"Ha, Westcott!" said a slurring voice.

The man was leaning against the hitch-rail; a lean, swarthy man with a slightly hooked nose. A man who seemed to have a perpetual sneer on his lips.

"Hello, Sebastian," Westcott said.

"So they patched you up. But you

don't look so good, Westcott. Mebbe they did a bad job on you."

Westcott looked calmly into Sebastian's black eyes. "Vince," he said, "one of these times I'm going to do a bad job on *you*."

Vince Sebastian straightened and put on an expression of mock fright. "Why, Mr. Westcott, you hadn't ought to talk like that!"

Westcott's lips tightened. Before he could make a reply, however, he heard the girl speaking to Stebbings. "I wonder if you could tell me where Mr. Preston Parrish lives."

Westcott inhaled sharply. So the girl *was* interested in Parrish. He'd been wondering about that ever since her exclamation when Parrish's name had been mentioned by Mosely and Papke.

Stebbings was scratching his head. "Well, Parrish lives out o' town a ways, Miss. But if you was wantin' to get out there, I reckon Mr. Sebastian there could help you."

Vince Sebastian stepped forward. "I'm a sort of partner of Parrish's, lady. Anythin' I could do for you?"

"Didn't Preston tell you I was coming?" the girl asked. "I'm his sister, Judy."

Westcott gasped. He was looking at Vince Sebastian's face and saw the man's eyes widén in astonishment. It was evident that he knew as little about Judy Parrish as Westcott did.

"Well," Sebastian said, "Preston didn't tell me he had a sister. But I sure can take you out to his place, Miss. Let me take those bags."

Westcott started up the street. That girl, Preston Parrish's sister. It was almost unbelievable. Why, she was a girl of the East; from her clothes, he guessed that she was used to the very best. Well, perhaps Parrish was, too. When he'd first come to Two Butte three years ago he'd had money. And he had a good deal more now. But why would he let his sister come to a place like Two Butte? Or had it changed?

CHAPTER II

The Homecoming

WESTCOTT turned in at the Two Butte Saloon, a two-story wooden structure, the largest building in the town — in the county, for that matter. It was cooler inside the saloon and there were quite a few customers lined up along the bar. Most of them were drinking beer.

They looked at Westcott as he approached. Only one of them spoke. He said, "Hi, Westcott."

Westcott stepped to the bare end of the bar. Pick Sprung, the bartender, moved over. "Hello, Westcott," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Got a room I can rent?"

Sprung shrugged. "This is a public hotel." He turned around and picked up a key from several lying on the back bar. "Room six, it's on the corner."

Westcott took his carpet bag up to his room, then came down again. He crossed to the livery stable and rented a saddled horse. He rode down past the Two Butte Saloon and two or three bystanders looked at him. But they did not speak.

It was late in the afternoon when he rode up to the headquarters of the Ogden ranch. Things hadn't changed much. The many buildings, built like little forts with the huge rambling adobe house in the center, still sprawled over several acres. There were still numerous cowpunchers around. But none of them ran up to Bob Westcott. By the time he reached the ranch house his lips were set in a thin line. He dismounted a little distance from the house.

And then suddenly she was there. Ethel Ogden. Tall and slim and golden-haired and wearing a dress of pink and pale blue.

The blood rushed to Bob Westcott's face. "Ethel," he said and his voice was hoarse. He was thinking suddenly of a day just a little more than six

months ago when he had held this girl in his arms, when she had surrendered her lips to his. When they had talked about their future together.

And he was thinking, too, of those six months in the hospital in Dallas when she had not come to him; when

JUDY PARRISH

she had not even written. Six long, maddening months of silence. And now she was looking at him, her face white and strained. Taut.

"Bob!" she said. "You—"

"I didn't die," he said.

Her face twinged with pain at that. She shook her head at him. "You shouldn't have come back, Bob. Didn't you hear—" she broke off.

A man had come out of the house behind her. A tall man in a high-crowned black Stetson. A man with a lean, saturnine face, narrow-set eyes and a full, cruel-looking mouth.

"What're you doing here, Westcott?" he growled.

The blood throbbed suddenly hot in Westcott's temples. This man was Preston Parrish, arch-enemy of Fred Ogden and all that was Fred Ogden. What was he doing here on the Ogden Ranch?

"I guess I could ask the same thing of you, Parrish," Westcott retorted. "I work here—or did a while ago." He turned his eyes abruptly back to Ethel Ogden. "Where's your dad, Ethel?"

She did not reply directly to that question. She cleared her throat and said in a strained voice. "Bob, I—I'm going to marry Preston."

The world seemed suddenly to stand still. In the far-off distance Westcott heard the rush of wind. The shimmering heat waves twisted things before his eyes and made a kaleidoscopic gargoyle of Ethel Ogden. He saw her face as a disembodied thing. He was ten feet from her but he saw her eyes as clearly as if they had been twelve inches from his.

And then Preston Parrish spoke and everything was as it had been before. As it would never be again. "It's goin' to be soon, Westcott. We'll send you an invitation."

Then the words exploded from Westcott's lips. "Why are you marrying him, Ethel?"

She recoiled. "Why?"

"Look here, Westcott," Preston Parrish blustered. "What the hell business is it of yours?"

"Maybe none, Parrish," Westcott said, "but it *is* my business that your gunman shot me. And I'm going to talk to you about that one of these days."

"Bob!" Ethel Ogden said. "I think you had better go."

Westcott looked at Ethel Ogden for a long moment. She returned his stare steadily, unflinching. He turned and mounted his horse. But when he turned it to rid off, a heavy-set man came out of the ranch house and called to him.

"Westcott, wait a minute!"

"Let him go, Fred!" snapped Preston Parrish's voice.

Fred Ogden did not heed Parrish. He trotted up to Westcott's horse and walked beside him as the horse moved away. "Bob," said Fred Ogden, "I heard from the house. It was raw!"

Westcott looked down at Ethel's father. The old man had aged during the last six mouths. His once iron-gray hair had turned almost white. His face was more lined than it had been, but it was still fierce.

"What's happened, Mr. Ogden?" he asked quietly.

"To Ethel, Bob? Damned if I know. That feud, it got pretty bad. Until a month or so ago when Parrish began letting up—to—well, to court Ethel."

"You let him?"

Fred Ogden winced. "Bob, I'd lost more than twenty men. It was hell. I was glad of any excuse to stop it. Even Parrish's lovemaking to Ethel. I spoke to her about it and she shut me up. Said it was *her* business. Which it was. Anyway, she kinda held him off—until today. He came riding out here in a helluva hurry and first thing I knew it was settled. But, Bob, you know how I feel."

"Do I?" There was bitterness in Westcott's tone. "Maybe you know how I feel? How I felt in bed these last six months without a word from you."

"But I did write you, Bob!" cried old Fred Ogden. "I thought you were sore at me because you didn't write back. Good Lord, man, don't I know what you went through for *me?*"

There was sincerity in the old man's voice. But Westcott had taken too much today. He was tired. He said, "All right, Mr. Ogden. The feud's over. That's good. Me, I guess I'll be riding on."

"How you feelin', boy?" Fred Ogden asked anxiously. "You don't look so well."

"I'm fine. Could have been back weeks ago. Just took things kind of easy there in Dallas. I still got a few dollars and I'm thinking I'll ride over Arizona way. I heard they found gold over in Cochise County."

"But you'll come back, Bob? In a year or two things'll maybe be quieted down. You know I'll be glad to have you back ramroddin' this outfit. The job'll always be open for you."

"Thanks, Fred, I'll remember it. And now—so long!"

The old man reached up his hand. Westcott caught it hurriedly, squeezed it and kneed his horse. He had to get away, quick. He felt a coughing spell coming. It came when he was a dozen feet away. But he didn't turn back.

A quarter-mile away he had to stop, though. The coughing had started a slow hemorrhage. It left him weak and dizzy. He rode on toward Two Butte.

Back in Two Butte he tied the horse to the hitch-rail. Then, walking toward the Two Butte Saloon, he saw the little sign over the door of a long, flimsy frame shack.

He pushed open the door. Gray-haired Dr. Toban sat with boots on a pine table, reading an El Paso newspaper. He brought his feet down to the floor with a crash when he saw Westcott.

"Bob! When'd you get back to Two Butte?"

"Today. I hear you been doin' a rushing business."

A cloud passed over the old doctor's face. "The coroner's been doin' the best business, although I got my share. But, Bob, how are you feeling?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I kinda wanted you to look me over. Been coughing a little blood."

"Blood? From your lung? It was a bullet in the lung, wasn't it?"

"That's what they said in Dallas."

"Take off your shirt." Dr. Toban went to a cabinet and got out some instruments. He prodded muscles, tapped here and there and listened with a stethoscope. He looked in Westcott's mouth and tested blood. It was a thorough examination.

After about fifteen minutes, Dr. Toban said, "All right, Bob."

Westcott picked up his shirt and put it on. He twisted a bandanna about his throat and put on his flat-crowned black Stetson. He adjusted the cartridge belt around his hips. Not until then did he turn to Dr. Toban. The doctor's silence had already told him the diagnosis was not a favorable one.

"Well, Doc," he said, "what's the verdict? The truth!"

Gray haired Dr. Toban cleared his throat. "Well, it's not so good. But nothing to worry about. You take things easy, stay out in the sun as much

PRESTON PARRISH

as you can. No strenuous work. And no excitement."

"And how'm I going to live without working?"

Dr. Toban shook his head. "I'm sorry, Boy, I'm giving it to you straight. You take things easy for a couple of months. Or. . . ." he shrugged.

"Thanks, Doc." Westcott smiled and walked out of the little office.

Heat waves shimmered over the single street of Two Butte. Westcott no longer felt the heat. He was cold. Clammy hands gripped at his vitals, squeezed with icy fingers.

Take things easy. No excitement. In Lafayette County, after what he'd been told today!

Instinctively his boots turned into the Two Butte Saloon. Up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said.

Pick Sprung, the sullen barkeep, shoved a bottle across the smooth bar. "Takin' up drinkin', Westcott?" he asked.

"Any law against an honest man having a drink, Sprung?" Westcott retorted. "Or do you prefer to sell only to thieves?"

Pick Sprung flushed. It was common knowledge that Preston Parrish owned the saloon and it had been the custom of the Ogdenites to declare that everything pertaining to Parrish, everyone friendly to him, must be crooked. For more than a year Ogden men had said that—and backed it up with guns. It seemed, though, that this was no longer the custom.

There were customers in the saloon, several. Westcott's insult had been clearly spoken. Pick Sprung couldn't let it pass.

"Westcott," he said, "yore trade ain't wanted here. Get out." He reached for the bottle of whiskey before Westcott, but the latter made a swift grab for it. He caught it up and with a flip of his wrist tossed it to the floor behind him.

Then he planted both hands on the bar in front of him and stared steadily into Pick Sprung's eyes. "It's your move now!" he said.

Pick Sprung wasn't the most peaceful citizen of Two Butte. His face darkened from hot blood, but something he saw in Westcott's eyes stiffened him. He mumbled something inaudible.

A harsh voice took up Pick's cause. "Give him the bung-starter, Pick!"

Bob Westcott turned slowly. There were three men along the bar. He picked out the swarthy man with the hooked nose.

"Sebastian," he said slowly, "I think I'm going to kill you."

Vince Sebastian sneered. "How long were you in the hospital from the last time you tried to kill me?"

Westcott picked up the little glass of whiskey he had filled before breaking the bottle. He threw it, glass and all, into Vince Sebastian's face.

Sebastian screamed in anger and pain as he clawed at his eyes. Westcott stepped back and waited, hands hung limply at his sides, until Sebastian wiped the whiskey free of his eyes.

Then both men stared at each other. Sebastian's face, twisted with almost uncontrollable fury, Westcott, cold and impassive. Pick Sprung, behind the bar moved and stepped on a creaking plank. The squeak was like a signal.

Vince Sebastian shuddered and his hands went for his guns, both of them. He was a fast man on the draw. His hands seemed barely to have moved

than they were filled and the right-hand gun had belched.

At a range of only ten feet the bullet missed Westcott by a foot. Sebastian, a deadly shot, must have seen the fatalitic despair in Westcott's face at the last moment and been unnerved. At any rate, he missed. And he didn't get time to shoot again.

The second shot was Westcott's—and he didn't miss. The huge slug from his Frontier Model Colt's .45 whacked into Sebastian's dark forehead.

Sebastian took a half step back. For a moment he teetered crazily, then fell forward to the floor.

The thud of his body broke the spell in the saloon. Pick Sprung cried out. But the two men who had been with Sebastian did not move an inch. They stood against the bar as if frozen. Their faces still showed surprise. They had been relaxed, because they had counted on Sebastian killing Westcott.

And now Westcott's gun was pointing at them.

"All right, Foster," Westcott said. "Make your play. Or you, Spain!"

Kim Foster looked sidewise at Westcott. His face showed no perturbation. He was a squat, muscular man of about twenty-seven, dark complected.

"It was Sebastian's quarrel," he said.

"And you, Spain?" exclaimed Westcott. "Don't you want to make it your quarrel?"

John Spain licked his lips. There was desire in his eyes. Desire to kill. It was usually in them. John Spain was a boy, a tall, slender kid of twenty, blue-eyed and blond. With a diseased brain. He was kill-crazy, the deadliest killer that had ever hit the country. Preston Parrish had nurtured him, brought him into full bloom.

But he did not draw against Westcott. That was because Westcott's gun was in his hand and he was looking at Spain. The killer got more sport out of it by flushing his victims unexpected, by killing them when there was stark terror in their eyes. And there was none in Westcott's.

Westcott laughed shortly. His gun still before him he backed out of the saloon, through the batwing doors—into the muzzle of a gun. His muscles tensed and he would have whirled and fired except that a cool voice spoke to him.

"Easy does it, Westcott!"

He recognized the voice. It was that of Sheriff Bill Walker, one of the very few neutral men in all Lafayette County. Walker was an old-timer, as honest as they come. He had tried his level best to stop the range feud between the Parrish and Ogden factions, but his hands had been tied. Parrish was the county prosecutor. In some instances his authority exceeded that of the sheriff. And Fred Ogden was a feudal baron. He was his own law.

Had the voice behind Westcott been any but the sheriff's he would, even though it had meant his own death, have turned and fired. But he couldn't fire against Sheriff Walker.

He started to turn slowly, his gun muzzle elevating automatically.

Sheriff Walker reached for Westcott's gun. "Give it to me, Bob," he began. "We'll—"

And then a gun blasted behind Bob Westcott. He saw the sheriff reel back, saw blood spurt suddenly from his forehead. And then Sheriff Walker was falling against him.

Horrified, Westcott caught the sheriff. He lowered him gently to the wooden sidewalk. On his knees he looked at the batwing doors of the saloon. The bullet had come from there. But why hadn't it gone into Westcott's back? Why had the assassin killed Walker instead? Westcott had been a better, and—in view of what had transpired in the saloon—a more logical target.

But Westcott wasn't given time to think that over. A bullet whacked through the batwing doors of the saloon and whizzed over his head. It was followed instantly by another and another.

Westcott sprang up. He leaped toward the hitch rail a little distance away, where he had tied his rented horse. Out of one eye he saw men run-

ning toward him. And one of those men he recognized. Long, lean Lou Detterback, the deputy sheriff. As cruel as Walker had been kindly, as biased as Walker had been nonpartisan.

"Throw down your gun, Westcott!" Detterback cried from a distance of more than a hundred feet. He punctuated his command with a bullet in Westcott's direction.

Westcott threw down his gun—on Detterback. He sent a quick shot flying at the lean deputy that made the man yelp and spring for an open doorway.

Then Westcott vaulted into the saddle of his horse. The horse started down the street, past the Two Butte Saloon. A man or two came out. Westcott sent a bullet crashing over their heads and they leaped back into the saloon.

Westcott cleared the buildings of

ETHEL OGDEN

Two Butte before the pursuit really got going. Then it was only two or three men against him. And the men did not seem to want to pursue too closely. They had respect for Westcott's gun since it had downed Vince Sebastian.

Westcott's rented gelding was a good one. But it had traveled out to the Ogden Ranch and back and was none too fresh. Lou Detterbach and whoever was pursuing Westcott could have run down Westcott, if they'd had just a bit more nerve and more daylight.

Twilight had already been falling when the fight in the saloon had taken place. By the time the pursuit had gone two miles the pursuers had difficulty seeing their quarry. To further confuse them Westcott took to a patch of cottonwoods. When he came out on the other side he had lost the posse.

He was safe for today. They wouldn't find him in the dark. But with the morning Detterback would augment his posse with Parrish men. Included would be men who could track as good as an Apache. They would, in time, run Westcott down unless he got to some place where the posse would not want to follow.

And that was where Westcott headed. The Badlands, the stronghold of Charlie Keeler. Westcott knew that country as well as any man in Lafayette County, with the exception of the actual residents of the hill country. He had hunted and trapped in there as a boy. Even then Charlie Keeler had been a legend. But except for an occasional foray he had been a more or less harmless legend. Westcott had seen men in the hills on his trips, but they had been furtive creatures much more interested in being left alone than in molesting a kid intruder. Of course had the intruder been a lawman. . . .

CHAPTER III

Pursuit

AFTER Fred Ogden had seen Bob Westcott ride away he went to the bunkhouse. He did not want to return to the ranch house and talk to Preston Parrish. Not after what had just transpired. He was afraid his pent-up hate for the man would explode. And he did not want the open warfare to break out again. Anything but that.

Two hours later, he figured it safe to return to the ranch house and entered it by a roundabout way. He did not find Ethel in the house but, hearing no noise on the veranda, opened the door. He had a quick glimpse of her unguarded face and it was a shock to him.

"What's wrong, Ethel?" he asked gruffly.

The mask went over her face and she smiled at her father. "Nothing, Dad. I was just sitting here thinking!"

"About Preston Parrish?"

There was the least hesitation before she replied, but when she spoke her tone was decisive, clear. "Yes. Isn't it natural for a girl to think of her husband-to-be?"

He said something in an undertone, then aloud, "You know, of course, that I'm not very happy about this, Ethel. When he came around here, sparking, I didn't say anything. I—well, there'd been enough trouble. And I thought you'd send him packing after while. I never thought—"

"Why not, Dad? What's wrong with Preston? He's liked me for three years. He said—well, never mind that. But Preston's going to be a big man. He's only thirty and he's prosecuting attorney of a big county. And as a rancher, his holdings are second only to yours."

"But you don't have to marry him for money," Fred Ogden exclaimed. "And as for his success, Ethel, you know very well how he got it. He came in here three years ago and when no one was looking, or expecting it, he bought the county politics. With the law behind him he began crowding everyone around. He started the range war."

"Did he, Dad? A good many people are saying *you* did that."

"Ethel!" Fred Ogden said thickly. "You're not turning against me?"

Her face showed an instant of pain. Then she said, in a contrite tone, "No, Dad. I'll never do that. But, don't you see, my marriage to Preston will settle everything? It'll stop the terrible fighting that's gone on here for a year."

"I know," he conceded. "That—that's why I didn't kill him when he first dared to set his foot on this ranch a month ago. But what about Bob Westcott?"

He saw her face tighten and he had a sudden ominous feeling way down in him. Yet Ethel replied to his question quite calmly enough.

"Bob? Why, there never was much between us. After all, Preston's an educated man, wealthy—"

Fred Ogden turned away from his daughter abruptly and went into the house. He did not see Ethel during supper. But a couple of hours later, Bill Megan, Ogden's foreman came into the ranch house office.

"Boss," he said, "Stumpy just came in from Two Butte. It's busted wide open again. Bob Westcott killed Vince Sebastian and when Sheriff Walker tried to arrest him, he killed the sheriff!"

Fred Ogden's mouth fell open. "Gawd!" he said. "You sure?"

"Stumpy heard what happened. He's sober. Anyway, he said he had to ride like hell to get here ahead of Preston Parrish. And say, something else, Stumpy says there's a girl come in on the stage today who says she's Parrish's sister."

Fred Ogden was surprised. "I didn't know he had a sister."

"No one else did, either. Say! I guess that's Parrish now."

Ogden's sharp ears had already heard the clatter of horses' hoofs outside. He got up and went to the door. And somehow Ethel was beside him.

Preston Parrish and Deputy Sheriff Lou Detterback stamped into the house. Parrish's lean face was dark with anger. "You heard what happened?" he snapped.

Ogden nodded. "Yes, but I can't believe that Westcott would kill both Sebastian and Walker. He's not a killer, you know."

"The devil he isn't!" snapped Parrish. "He tried to down Sebastian six

months ago and only got beat by a hair. The boys tell me he shot down Sebastian in cold blood."

"That's a lie, Preston!"

Preston Parrish gasped. "Ethel!"

She faced him, cold and imperturbable. "Bob Westcott never shot anyone in cold blood. If he killed Sebastian *you can* be sure it was done fairly."

"You're taking his side?" snarled Parrish. "Why, you promised—"

"I've been thinking things over," Ethel Ogden said quietly. "I've changed my mind." Then a slight shudder ran suddenly through her body. It was as if she had just recovered from a hypnotic spell.

Parrish stepped back. He drew in a deep breath. "Come on, Lou," he said, "you can see how things stand here."

"Yes," said Fred Ogden. "You know how we stand. Your man, Sebastian, had it coming to him. Westcott was working for me six months ago. I never took him off the payroll."

"Maybe he was still workin' for you when he knocked off the sheriff?" sneered Lou Detterback.

"It hasn't been proved he did that yet!" snapped Fred Ogden. "I suppose some people'll call you sheriff, now, Detterback. But I don't intend to. And I'm warning you, you try anything funny with Westcott. . . ."

"Lou's getting up a posse to catch Westcott," said Parrish. "Perhaps you'd like to send some of your men along. He lit out for the Badlands, but we figure on catching him tomorrow."

"I think I'll do just that." Fred Ogden turned to Bill Megan. "Bill, round up about a dozen of the boys. I want Westcott to get a fair chance. If he did kill Walker, well, he'll have an honest trial, anyway. Even if you are the prosecutor, Parrish."

Later, Fred Ogden came upon Ethel in the big living-room of the house. She was sitting in a rattan chair, her hands folded tightly between her knees. She looked at her father and smiled faintly.

"Well, my getting engaged to Preston to stop the feud didn't work."

JOHN SPAIN

"It wouldn't have, anyway, Ethel. He wanted you; figured it was one way of cutting in on this ranch. After the wedding he'd have cut loose again. I tell you, that man's bad."

"I know. But I thought I could stall things until Bob got away safely. That's why. . . . Dad, do you think they'll get him?"

Fred Ogden shrugged. "I don't know. Bob's lived around here most of his life. He knows the Badlands as well, I guess, as most of Charlie Keeler's men. But they've got a pretty big posse. Parrish's determined to get him."

"And if he does, what then?"

"Megan and the boys won't let anything happen out there. And we'll see that he gets an even break in Two Butte. Parrish is the prosecutor, but he isn't the judge. Besides, I think the governor might take a hand. Anyway, Ethel, we're going to stick by Bob."

Ethel smiled wanly. She was thinking of Bob Westcott's face. How it had looked when she had seen him that afternoon, when she had told him. She would see his face like that for a long, long time.

VINCE SEBASTIAN had brought Judy Parrish to her brother's house in a buckboard. It was a short ride, less than a mile out of Two Butte. Judy was pleasantly surprised when she saw the sprawling white washed adobe house

and the well kept yards about it. She liked, too, the furnishings in the house. Her brother's taste had not been dulled since coming West.

The furniture was mostly new, she noted. Probably in keeping with Preston's recent prosperity. He had written her that he had made a great deal of money in the cattle business. He had not written her about other things. Except that he expected, in a little while, to marry the daughter of one of the richest ranchers in the State.

Vince Sebastian told her nothing about Preston, even though she asked him. "He's out in the country a little ways," he said. "He'll be back before night. Just you take over and sit tight."

There was a horde of Mexican servants about the house. They spoke no English to amount to anything and Sebastian rattled off an explanation in Spanish. The result of that found Judy ensconced in a big chair in the living-room, her bags whisked away.

Then after a while, Preston came back. He knew before he came into the house, but he was still surprised when he saw her. "Judy!" he cried. "Why'd you come out here?"

"I wrote you in my last letter," she explained. "Didn't you get it?"

"I haven't looked at my mail in two days. Been to busy. But why—"

"Aunt Julia went to Europe. I didn't feel like going with her this time. You said I could come out soon and as long as you also said you were doing so well I didn't see why I couldn't come out now. I wrote you that I was starting. Don't you want me here?"

He shook his head. "Frankly, no. Things are a bit upset around here. We've had trouble with cattle thieves—"

"Cattle thieves, Preston? I heard some talk on the stage-coach. Something about a feud between you and some rancher by the name of Ogden."

"What'd you hear?" he asked swiftly.

"Something about shooting. One man said a great many men had been killed. Another said it was exaggerated. I didn't know who to believe."

He shook his head. "Unfortunately there's some truth to what you heard, Judy. Some men have been killed, but only trouble-makers and thieves. This isn't Boston, Judy. This country is wild. What law there is—"

"But you're a law officer, Preston. You're the prosecuting attorney of this county."

He laughed harshly. "There's very little prosecuting to be done. They settle their quarrels outside of the courts here—with guns. I'd starve if I had to depend on my income as prosecuting attorney. That's why I went into the cattle business. I was doing well at it, too, until this trouble with Ogden came up. But that's all settled. I wrote you about Ethel Ogden. She's the girl I'm going to marry. A very fine girl, too, considering her family."

"I'd like to meet her, Preston."

"You shall, tomorrow. You'll get along with her. She's very much your type."

A slender, blond man opened the door without knocking. He stopped just inside the door and looked at Judy Parrish. But he spoke to her brother. "Boss, can I talk to you a minute?"

"Sure, Johnny. Go ahead. This is my sister, Judy. Judy, Johnny Spain, one of my men."

"Please to meetcha," said Johnny Spain. His eyes never left Judy's face and she flushed under his steady stare.

"How do you do?" she said.

"Well, what is it, Johnny?" Preston Parrish asked.

Johnny Spain finally looked at Parrish. "Mebbe I better tell you alone. It's—trouble!" He winked at his employer.

Preston Parrish fowned. "Will you excuse me, Judy?" He followed Johnny Spain out of the house.

"It's about Vince, Boss." Johnny Spain said then. "He's dead. Westcott gunned him ten minutes ago in the saloon."

Parrish gasped. "Westcott *killed* Sebastian?"

"And Sheriff Walker, too. Westcott drew on Sebastian and dropped him,

then when he was making his getaway the sheriff came up and Westcott killed him, too."

"And where were you during all that?"

Johnny Spain scowled. "I was right there. Me and Kim Foster. We wasn't expecting Westcott to pull a gun and he got the drop on us."

"On you and Foster?" Parrish's eyes narrowed.

Johnny Spain cursed. "First time any man ever got the drop on me. I ain't forgettin' it. I'll get him for that."

"Where's he now?"

Johnny Spain shrugged. "Detterback and a coupla fellows chased him. He was headin' for the Badlands. Lou didn't seem so anxious to catch up with him."

"Lou's a scared jackrabbit!" snapped Parrish. "But you and Kim—I thought better of you two."

"Lay off!" snapped Johnny Spain testily. "He got us by surprise. What could we do? I never was much on this chasin' and shootin' stuff. Besides it was too near dark."

Preston Parrish sighed. "I wasn't countin' on that Westcott fellow comin' back here at this time and stirring up trouble. Things were going nice. In two-three weeks I'd have had the whole county sewed up. This may cause some slip-up. Fred Ogden's got a soft spot for Westcott. I saw it this afternoon. Well, we've got to get him. Understand, Johnny? Get some of the boys and form a posse. Lou can lead it."

"I get the idea, Parrish."

Parrish went back to the house. His sister saw his face and asked, "Trouble, Pres?"

"Yes. A damn trouble-maker I thought we were rid of came back to Two Butte today. He just killed one of my men and the sheriff. Say, he probably came in on the stage with you today."

Judy Parrish inhaled sharply. "Westcott, is that the man?"

"Yes. You talked to him?" Parrish's tone was sharp.

"Hardly a word. You say he killed

KEELER

two men today. Why, the man was sick. He bled at the mouth on the stage. Said he'd been in a hospital for a long time."

"So he had. Vince Sebastian sent him there. Now he got Vince."

"Why, that's the man who brought me out here just a little while ago. And now he's dead?" Judy Parrish was shocked.

"I told you this country was wild, Judy," Parrish said grimly. "I've had to fight like the devil since I got here three years ago."

Judy Parrish looked at her brother in awe. Something was gnawing at her. The words of Jeff Mosely and Papke, the hardware drummer. A slight shudder ran through her.

Preston Parrish didn't see it. He was taking a cartridge belt with a gun and holster out of a desk. He already wore one. His sister stared at him as he buckled the second belt crosswise over the first. Two guns. Her brother—a college graduate, a lawyer and public official. What sort of country was this to which she had come?

"I've got to go out, Judy," Preston Parrish said. "May be out until late. You're perfectly safe here. There're fifteen or twenty men here and plenty of servants. María will take care of you."

CHAPTER IV

Surrounded

BOB WESTCOTT rode for hours. His gelding was a sure-footed animal, yet it would have found the going hard had not Westcott guided it. The first couple of hours traveling was over fairly even ground, but after that it became rougher. A pale half-moon came up and it showed a distant shadowy butte. Westcott kept toward it.

He rested the horse several times and it was almost dawn when he finally stopped before a square shadow against an almost perpendicular cliff. He tied the gelding to a sapling and advanced toward the shadow. He fumbled around for a moment and found a door. He pushed it open, stepped into black gloom and struck a match. By its feeble light he found a lantern and applied the match to it.

The lantern revealed the interior of a small log cabin, dusty and unkempt. There was a rusted sheet-iron stove, a rough table, a couple of three-legged stools, and a bunk.

Westcott was tired. He stretched out upon the dusty floor and was asleep almost instantly. . . . The next thing he knew the sun was shining in his eyes. He lay still for a moment on the floor, then heard the gelding outside, nicker. He blinked and sprang to his feet.

He crossed hurriedly to the door, then stepped back quickly and drew his gun. With it in his hand he stepped through the door.

Two riders were approaching the little cabin. Westcott hailed them. "Hello, boys!"

They did not seem surprised. They had already seen his horse. And they very carefully kept their hands away from their own guns. Westcott noted that they had rifles in scabbards.

They came up but did not dismount. Both were disreputable looking ruffians, bearded and unkempt. One of them was red-haired, the other older and gray.

"Howdy, stranger," the redhead said.

"Saw we had neighbors," the other one offered, "so we came over. Figger on stayin' a while?"

"That depends," Westcott said, "on Charlie Keeler."

"You know Charlie?" asked the red haired man.

"No, but I'd like to."

"How come?"

Westcott shrugged and looked significantly down at his gun. "Got in a bit of trouble. I figure maybe I'd like to lay low. You boys know Charlie Keeler?"

They did not reply directly to the question. The red-bearded man screwed up his mouth. "What sorta trouble, mister?"

"A man named Vince Sebastian pulled a gun on me in Two Butte. I killed him."

The younger man whistled. "Sebastian, huh? And you gunned him?" There was respect in his tone.

The gray-haired one nodded. "I've heard of this Sebastian, too. But from what I heard folks'd pay a bounty for his scalp. There wouldn't be no reason for anyone wantin' you."

"Someone killed the sheriff," Westcott elaborated, "and it seems I'm to be blamed for that, too."

The two men looked at one another. Then the older one said to Westcott. "Might be we'll see Keeler. We'll tell him you're lookin' for him."

"You'll find me around here," said Westcott.

They rode off again. Westcott guessed that they'd make a beeline to Charlie Keeler's headquarters. A stranger in the Badlands had to be accounted for. Westcott knew he couldn't remain in the hills very long without the ancient outlaw's tacit permission. He didn't have any qualms about that, though. Undoubtedly Keeler had a spy or two in Two Butte. He must have to have kept on so long in this country. They'd report that Westcott was defi-

nitely an outlaw and as such he'd be eligible to membership in Charlie Keeler's gang.

Westcott sat down in the doorway of the cabin. The sun came up warm and Westcott was reminded that he hadn't coughed since the day before. Doctor Toban had warned him against overexertion. Well, he'd certainly exerted himself since reaching Two Butte. But he was feeling better than he had in weeks. Riding a horse wasn't as bad as a jolting stage-coach.

But his thoughts were not pleasant. He couldn't get them off Ethel Ogden. The last man in the world he'd have expected her to marry was Preston Parrish, arch-enemy of the Ogden family. But perhaps Ethel had seen a way to ally the two most powerful factions in the county. If they combined they'd have the biggest ranch in the State, perhaps the largest holdings. Parrish would like such a plan. The man was ambition-mad.

It was mid-morning when Westcott heard the clatter of hoofs in the distance. He got up and stepped away from the cabin to see the riders. Charlie Keeler's boys, no doubt. Yet why should Keeler approach with such a large force?

Then the riders rounded the canyon wall and Westcott's blood ran cold. Lou Detterback! With more than a score of men. How in the world had the deputy found Westcott's hiding place so quickly? Why, the man must have been outside the badlands at dawn and then with light, ridden straight here. And Westcott could have sworn that no one but a Badlands denizen could have found this cabin up a blind canyon. He'd hunted all through here for years and had only discovered it a year or two ago. It was thirty or forty years old, built years ago by a trapper or prospector, no doubt.

Westcott made a flying leap for the cabin door. As he reached it something thunked into a log and he heard the crack of a carbine. Westcott slammed the door shut and dropped a wooden bar across it. He leaped to a window. The posse was spreading out in fan shape, two hundred yards away. Too long for pistol range. But the posse had rifles. Another bullet whacked into the cabin walls, then another. Westcott thrust his gun through the tiny window and let fly a bullet at the attackers, just to warn them not to come too close.

A handkerchief went up on a rifle barrel and the holder rode closer. "We want a talk with you, Westcott!"

Westcott lifted up the bar across the door and ripped it open, savagely. He was seething inwardly. He had eaten nothing since the day before. He certainly hadn't counted on being holed up in a box canyon. He could perhaps stand off this posse, but he couldn't outlast them. There were too many.

He stepped out. "Come ahead!" he called.

The rider came closer. Westcott saw with surprise that it was Bill Megan of the Ogden Ranch. "How come, Bill?" he asked. "You throw in with Detterback?"

"Of course not, Bob," replied Megan. "Ogden sent a bunch of the boys along with the posse. Just in case."

"Yeah? To help get me."

Megan rode closer. "It's all started again," he said in a lowered voice. "Ethel told off Parrish—"

"What?"

"She's been stringin' him along to stop the feud. But when Parrish blew in last night and started rippin' you up and down for killin' the sheriff, Ethel took your part. They had a regular blow-off, then."

"Ethel took my part?" Westcott asked wonderingly. Then he shook his head. "But why the big posse?"

"To bring you in. Half the gang's Detterback's, the rest is ours. Ogden figured they might not bring you in, that they'd shoot you out here."

"How'd you know where to find me?"

"We didn't. Until an old hillbilly rode up an hour or so ago and had a chin-chin with Lou Detterback!"

Westcott's lips tightened. "That was

something I hadn't even counted on. So Detterback's in with Charlie Keeler! At least, Keeler's men do favors for him. Well, what you think I ought to do, Bill? Fight it out or give up?"

"You couldn't fight it out, Bob. Ogden'll see you get a chance in court. He's making an appeal to the governor today."

Westcott sighed. "All right, then, I'll surrender."

Bill Megan turned in his saddle and signaled to the posse. Several of them immediately dashed up. Westcott noted that one of the men was Johnny Spain. The youthful killer was grinning wickedly. "You didn't last so long as a badman, did you?"

"Maybe I'm not finished yet, Johnny," Westcott retorted. "Some time I might see you—without your gang."

"That won't be very soon, Westcott," snorted Lou Detterback, the lean deputy. "I got a hunch you ain't gonna do much of anything any more."

CHAPTER V

In Jail

TWO BUTTE looked like Saturday night. The word about Bob Westcott's gunplay had gone around and it drew folks to town like the news of an auction sale. Horses were lined along the hitch-racks on both sides of the street. At noon the saloons were already getting a big play.

And then the posse came into Two Butte. More than a score of men—in two distinct groups. Bob Westcott, unarmed, was closely guarded by the deputy sheriff's group.

Strangely, none of the spectators on either side of the street made much audible comment. These people were split into two factions: men who worked for Ogden or were sympathetic to him, or friends and employees of Preston Parrish. An overt word, a catcall would, in all likelihood, have started a slaughter in Two Butte.

The cavalcade stopped at the far end of the street before the jail. It was a two-story building, solidly built of adobe. The sheriff's office and courtroom were on the first floor, the jail on the second. A wooden staircase on the outside of the building led to the second floor.

Detterback and a couple of men escorted Westcott upstairs. The upstairs was really only one large room, but it was split down the middle by a wall of iron bars. There were four cells on one side. The other side was a single large room in which were chairs, a couple of tables a couple of bunks. Matt Siddall, the jailer, lived here practically twenty-four hours a day.

"Got a customer for you, Matt," Detterback said when he brought in Westcott.

"That's fine, Lou," replied Siddall. "Been pretty lonesome here lately. No prisoners at all."

He pointed toward an open cell door. "Here's a nice room."

"In you go, Westcott," Detterback said harshly.

Westcott entered the cell. Detterback locked the door and tossed the big key to Siddall. "You guard that with your life, Matt. This is a very special prisoner. He killed the sheriff."

"That's a lie, Detterback," said Westcott.

"You try provin' it is," retorted the deputy sheriff. He sneered at Westcott and went out. At the bottom of the outside staircase he saw Fred Ogden and Ethel Ogden.

"Come into your office, Detterback," Ogden said crisply. "I want to talk to you."

"I'll listen," glowered Detterback, "but you may as well know right now you ain't goin' to get no special favors from me. Not while I'm sheriff."

"But you're not sheriff," retorted Ogden.

"No?"

They went into the sheriff's office. Preston Parrish was already there, seated behind a desk that was backed up to the vacant sheriff's. He had complete

control of his feelings today and smiled blandly at Ethel Ogden as well as her father.

"Good morning. Anything I can do for you?"

"I want to go bail for young Westcott," Ogden said.

"That's not in my province. Judge Cochrane's the man you want. He's coming in right now."

Judge Cochrane was an old-timer. His long hair was white, as were his flowing mustaches. He had been a circuit judge for a dozen years. He was a fair man.

"Judge," Fred Ogden said, "I want to go bail for Bob Westcott. How much?"

The judge cleared his throat. "What's the charge?" He knew very well. He lived in Two Butte and everyone in the town knew what the charge was against Bob Westcott.

Preston Parrish replied, "Murder—double. He killed both Vincent Sebastian and Sheriff Walker in cold blood. I recommend no bail. And an immediate trial."

Judge Cochrane turned to Fred Ogden. "Murder's a serious charge, Mr. Ogden. The prosecutor is right. There shouldn't be any bail on a clear-cut murder charge."

"How do you know it's a clear-cut case?" demanded Ogden. "You've only got Parrish's say-so."

"I've got witnesses for the State," said Parrish. He grinned sardonically at Ethel Ogden. "You get witnesses for Westcott—if you can!"

"So you've already tried Bob Westcott," Ethel Ogden said icily. "You usually do try them before the court's in session."

Judge Cochrane exclaimed angrily, "Miss Ogden, I object to that remark."

"I'm sorry. I apologize. But it seems to me I recall cases when bail was set for men charged with no more than Westcott."

"The cases were not similar. It's fairly obvious—at least it's the talk of the town—that this Westcott killed the sheriff. Therefore, I cannot allow bail, But inasmuch as all the witnesses are here and I see no reason for delay, I'll set the trial for tomorrow. At ten o'clock."

The Ogdens had to be content with that. Outside, in front of the Butte General Store, Bill Megan had gathered with Ogden riders. "I think we'll stay in Two Buttes tonight, Bill," Fred Ogden told his foreman. "Better keep ten or twelve of the boys here. But, mind you, keep away from Parrish's gang. We don't want any trouble."

Bill Megan nodded. He started to turned away, then turned back and said in a low tone, "That must be Preston Parrish's sister!"

Ethel Ogden looked quickly. She saw Judy Parrish climb out of a buckboard, assisted by Kim Foster, who had suddenly burst out in boots costing $48.00 and a hat that assayed twice that in silver trimming alone. She saw Johnny Spain already heading toward Foster and Judy.

"Doesn't she know what sort of men Foster and Spain are?" Ethel asked of her father.

"She's Parrish's sister," he retorted.

WESTCOTT'S cell was about six feet wide and eight long. It contained a cot on which were some musty blankets. That was all. When Detterback left the jail room, Westcott dropped down on the cot. His thoughts ran riot. He had returned to Two Butte, sick and uneasy of mind. For months he'd been hurt. But not as hurt as he had been since yesterday afternoon.

He had taken one blow after another. Ethel's announcement of her coming marriage to Preston Parrish, Dr. Toban's diagnosis of his illness. Then on top of that, his fight with Vince Sebastian. Even though his justification for killing Sebastian was ample, he felt remorseful at it. Westcott was not a killer.

The accusation of killing Sheriff Walker did not worry him so much, even though it was probably the charge that would in the end, cause him the

greatest grief. His own conscience was clear on that point.

There was only one bright spot in it all. It had brought out Ethel Ogden's real purpose in not writing to him all those months and in her decision to marry Parrish. She was sticking by him, now.

Matt Siddall shuffled over to the cell door. "How's your poker, sonny?" he asked.

"Rusty," replied Westcott.

"That's fine," said Siddall brightening. "We'll play some tonight. Gets danged lonesome around here. Last prisoner I had was too slick with the cards. He won twenty-two dollars from me."

"How long was he in here?"

"Less'n two weeks. Then they hanged him."

Westcott changed the subject. "How's the food here?"

"Not so good," replied Siddall. "Unless you want it sent in from the restaurant. In which case you'll have to pay for it yourself."

"I'll try it for a while. Which reminds me, I missed supper last night and breakfast this morning. How about getting me some of that food?"

"Well, I dunno. Lou's still hangin' around downstairs. He wouldn't want me to leave you all alone, just yet. But, say, here's someone coming."

The door opened and Ethel Ogden came in. Matt Siddall brightened. "Maybe the girl can run across and get you some grub."

"You get it," said Westcott. "Take your key with you."

Siddall looked doubtful, but finally shrugged and went out. Ethel Ogden came over to Westcott's cell. Her face was flushed and her nostrils flared slightly. "Bob!" she said.

He looked at her steadily. "Megan told me something, Ethel, is it true? About—"

"Yes," she said. "I don't think I could really have gone through with it anyway." She stopped. Westcott's hand reached through the cell and caught hers. He drew her closer.

"I don't think I care much what happens now," he said.

"But *I* do, Bob. And we're going to get you out of here."

"If I'd stayed away," he said, "all this wouldn't have happened. Parrish will start again."

"He wouldn't have been satisfied anyway. He wants our range. He had just declared a truce so he could win a tactical victory. But, Bob, did you kill the sheriff?"

"No. I liked Walker. He was shot from the saloon. Either Kim Foster or Johnny Spain. But it's going to be hard proving I didn't kill him. They've pretty well ganged up on me."

"I know. But Dad's appealed to the governor. He's getting a lawyer for you, too. From outside. He won't be tainted with Parrish's money."

Lou Detterback came into the room. He saw Ethel Ogden and looked around for Siddall. Not seeing him in the jail room he scowled. "Where's Matt?"

"I asked him to get me something to eat," said Westcott.

"*You* asked him?" snapped Detterback. "Who do you think's running this jail?"

Siddall, unfortunately, came in at that moment carrying a tray. Detterback snarled at him. "What's the idea coddlin' a prisoner, Siddall? Supper's at six o'clock."

"He ain't eaten since yesterday," Siddall defended. "I didn't think there was any harm—"

"I'm running this jail now, Siddall," Detterback snapped. "If you want to keep your job you take orders from me. Take that food back."

"Isn't that carrying it a little far?" Ethel Ogden demanded coolly.

Lou Detterback glowered at her. "That's another thing. Prisoners can't have visitors unless I say so."

"Detterback," said Westcott, "I never did like you. I like you less than ever."

"That's fine," sneered the deputy sheriff. "Then we'll have a good time here together. I'm lookin' forward to it."

Ethel Ogden turned to Westcott. "I

think I'll have a talk with Judge Cochrane." She smiled at him and left the jail room.

Detterback came close to the door of Westcott's cell. "Fella," he said, "you're goin' to be with me for a little while. And you can make it a lot easier for yourself by comin' off that big horse of yours."

Westcott stared contemptuously at the lean deputy. "Detterback," he said, "somethin' tells me even if you are elected sheriff, you're not going to live to serve our your term."

"I'll live longer'n you!" retorted Detterback. "Your trial's tomorrow and in about a week or two they'll be takin' you out to a party. A necktie party."

CHAPTER VI

Sentenced to Hang

HIS trial brought out even a larger crowd than had the news of the sheriff's killing. An hour before the trial was to start, every available seat had been taken in the court-room and there were more than a hundred people outside.

Westcott's lawyer, a sour-faced man of about forty by the name of Templeton, came to see him at nine in the morning. "It's not so good," he said to Westcott. "The judge is against us. I tried to get a postponement and he turned me down. Same about a change of venue. He got sore about that. Said you'd get as fair a trial here as anywhere else."

"Maybe he's right about that," conceded Westcott. "We'd have to use the same witnesses elsewhere."

"Umm. I talked to Ogden about the thing. He's rounded up the witnesses. There's only two on our side that aren't afraid to talk. I'll have to try to tear down the prosecution's witnesses."

Detterback was in his element. He had sworn in a half-dozen new deputies to assist during the trial. Westcott knew them all; he knew, too, that they were all Parrish sympathizers, kept in cigarettes and whiskey by Parrish.

Westcott was handcuffed before he was taken downstairs. Detterback seemed to enjoy putting them on Westcott. "Oughta have leg irons, too," he growled.

The court-room was about forty by fifty feet. One end of it was partitioned off by a low railing. Behind this was a bench, a few chairs and a table for the judge.

Westcott was taken into the enclosure and seated at one side, with three deputies on either side of him. Preston Parrish was on the other side. His white shirt was ruffled and showed more than an inch of spotless cuff. He did not look at Westcott.

Westcott looked over the court-room. There was an aisle down the center and he noted that Fred Ogden and his friends were all on the right side of the aisle. Ogden and Ethel were in the front row. They nodded to Westcott.

He looked at the other side and saw Judy Parrish watching him covertly. He was slightly embarrassed. He remembered the little show of concern she'd made in the stage-coach yesterday. What did she think, now that her fellow passenger was on trial for a double killing?

Then he saw two others he knew; also former fellow passengers. Papke the hardware drummer, and Mosely, the young banker. Papke was regarding him with awe. He waved to Westcott. Westcott thought grimly of the stories Papke would tell after leaving Two Butte. They'd be different from the ones he'd told on his way to Two Butte.

Judge Cochrane came into the court-room from a door at the rear and the trial got quickly under way. When the preliminaries had been disposed of Preston Parrish took over. He was a good, convincing speaker, Westcott had to admit.

He built up a strong case against Westcott. By innuendo he intimated that Westcott had been the leader of the wild bunch that had been responsible for the atrocities of the year past,

He told how Westcott had had trouble with Sebastian before, how Sebastian, in self-defense, had been compelled to shoot Westcott. He put two witnesses on the stand to give testimony that there had been old enmity between the two men.

Then he brought the thing down to the present, had a witness tell about a conversation he had overheard when Westcott had got off the stage. He had threatened Sebastian, then, the witness told.

After that, he brought six witnesses out in quick order, each one having been present in the Two Butte Saloon during the last quarrel and fight with Sebastian. Pick Sprung was the leader of these witnesses. Johnny Spain and Kim Foster were not called to the stand.

"You can question the witnesses," Parrish said to Westcott's lawyer, Templeton.

Templeton asked them a few questions, but failed to break down their story. Parrish took up the shooting of Sheriff Walker then. He had new witnesses who had been spectators on the street. Chief of these was Lou Detterback, who had been two hundred feet away when it happened.

"Sheriff Walker tried to arrest him and Westcott shot him down without giving him a chance," Detterback said.

"Your witnesses," Parrish said again to Templeton.

Templeton got up. "No—I don't want to talk to any of them. But if you're through with witnesses, I'd like to call a couple."

"Go ahead."

"Very well. The first is John Spain!"

Parrish inhaled sharply. Then he grinned. Templeton was playing into his hands.

John Spain came through the railing. He sat down in the witness chair and crossed his legs. "Your name?" Templeton snapped.

"You said it yourself a minute ago," Spain replied insolently.

Templeton's eyes glinted. "All right. Now tell me, you were present when Vincent Sebastian was killed, weren't you? In fact, you and Mr. Kim Foster were with Sebastian, were you not?"

"Sure. What of it?"

"I wonder why Mr. Parrish didn't call you as a witness. You were certainly closer to what happened than anyone else."

Johnny Spain looked at Parrish. The prosecuting attorney said quickly, "You don't have to answer that!"

"All right," conceded Templeton. "We'll try something easier. Isn't it a fact, Mr. Spain, that you're wanted in Kansas for murder? And in Colorado and New Mexico?"

"I object!" cried Parrish. "The witness is not on trial."

"Perhaps he should be!" retorted Templeton.

Judge Cochrane rapped on his table with a hammer. "Counsel for the defense is out of order."

Templeton mumbled an apology. Then he got after Johnny Spain again. "You were present when the defendant was supposed to have shot Vincent Sebastian?" Spain said he was. "What did you do during this time?"

Johnny Spain scowled. "Nothin'. He had the drop on us."

"Oh, he did? All right, we'll concede that point. Did he disarm you? No? Well, then he backed out of the saloon. And a moment later he shot Sheriff Walker outside. And you didn't see that? In other words, when Mr. Westcott backed out of the saloon after killing your friend, you just remained at the bar. You didn't try to go after him. Why? Were you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone," snarled Johnny Spain. "What're you tryin' to pull?"

"I'm just trying to determine why you remained at the bar during all that was going on outside. My understanding is that even after the shooting outside, you did not immediately go out of the saloon. Which strikes me as awfully strange—for a man of your supposed prowess, your own admitted fearlessness."

Johnny Spain showed his teeth. But

Parrish caught his eye and shook his head.

Templeton had made his point. He called Kim Foster to the stand. He put him through the same sort of questioning. Foster didn't help the prosecution any. But he didn't help Westcott, either. The fact still remained that a total of fourteen witnesses had apparently "seen" him shoot Walker on the street. And six of them swore he had killed Sebastian inside the saloon.

At the end of two hours, the jury withdrew to the sheriff's office for deliberation. The crowds remained in the courtroom. Quick decisions were the rule in Lafayette County. A thing was so or it wasn't.

The jury came back in less than fifteen minutes. And the verdict was—guilty! It couldn't have been anything else with an impartial jury.

Ten minutes later Westcott was back in his cell upstairs. The sentence had been inevitable. Death by hanging, two weeks from date.

Siddall brought him his lunch from the restaurant, but Westcott had no appetite for it. A half-hour later Detterback came in to crow over him. "You see, my laddie buck, it came out like I told you. And just in case you figure your friends might try something funny, listen to this. A squad of Government cavalry just came into Two Butte. There's half a company coming before evening. They're going to stick around a while until things get settled in Two Butte. Which'll probably be after you're hanged."

"Is the town under martial law?" Westcott asked.

Detterback leered. "That's what you want, huh? Then I wouldn't be in charge of you. Well, it ain't. The cavalry's just campin' here—in case. And here's the payoff, Westcott. Know why they're here? Because of your friend, Ogden. He appealed to the governor last night. So now they're here. But it's their duty to see that the law is upheld. And there's enough of them to mow down every Ogden man in the county that tries getting you out of this jail. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

With that Detterback left. Siddall came over. "He's right about them troops, Westcott. You know I'm thinkin' of quittin' this job. If Detterback's goin' to be here permanent I don't think I want to be the jailer."

"Perhaps he won't be here permanently," said Westcott. He sighed. "Well, how about some more poker?"

"Fine," said Siddall. "I'm a dollar eighty in the hole now. Like to get it back."

He brought a stool over to the door of Westcott's cell. Then he sat down on a chair opposite. Westcott could reach through the bars and reach the stool. Not that it did him any good. The key to the cell was kept in the drawer of the table on the far side of the room. Westcott had watched Siddall put it there.

He lost eight dollars that afternoon, much to Siddall's pleasure. Westcott ordered a larger supper than usual and he took his time about eating it. It was seven-thirty when he finished.

"Mind if I keep my pie until later, Matt?" he asked.

"Naw, I don't mind. Only I wanted to get the dishes back."

"They can wait a while. Let's play a couple of hands, then I'll eat the pie and you can take the dishes back."

"All right." Siddall brought the stool and cards. He had forgotten something. Westcott hadn't. When Siddall brought food he unlocked the cell door to put in the tray, keeping one hand on his gun. He kept the cell key in his pocket until he redeemed the tray and dishes. He had it on his person now because the tray was still in Westcott's cell.

Westcott dealt the cards. "Matt," he said, after he looked at his cards, "I've got the best hand I've had today. Sorry I've got to do things to you.... I open for two bucks."

"Well, now," said Matt Siddall gleefully, "I got me a good hand, too. I call your two dollars and raise you three."

"Yeah?" Westcott scowled and

looked at his cards again. Then he laid them down on the stool and reached into his vest pocket. He brought out a folded ten dollar bill. "I'll call you. Gimme my change from this."

He reached the bill innocently through the bars at Siddall. Siddall reached for it and Westcott smashed him a terrific blow just behind the ear.

Siddall fell forward across the stool, slipped from it to the floor. Westcott reached quickly through the bars and pulled the old jailer closer. "Sorry, old-timer! It's my only chance. I had to do it." He fished the key out of Siddall's pocket and in a moment was out of the cell.

He had timed things well. It was beginning to get dark outside. Which was as he wanted it. There'd be a pursuit, but he could lose it if they didn't get him in the first ten minutes.

He had to have a gun, of course. He appropriated Siddall's, his cartridge belt and holster, too. Then he went across the room and picked up a double-barrelled shotgun. It was loaded, but searching around he could find no extra shells for it. He shook his head and stepped to the front window. Looking down cautiously he ran over the horses hitched at the rack down below.

There were four. From the distance and in the fading light he picked out the one he considered the best. He opened the door and stepped out.

There were four or five men on the street. At first they paid no attention to him, but when he was half-way down the stairs one of the men suddenly yelled. "Gawd! It's Westcott! He's escaping!"

Westcott quickly lowered the shotgun muzzle to cover the men.

"Get away!" he said harshly. "I'll kill the man who tries anything.

A man came dashing out of the restaurant across the street. "Westcott!" he yelled.

It was Lou Detterback. Westcott saw him as Detterback fired. The bullet slammed into the building three inches from Westcott's head.

"Remember what I told you, Detterback?" Westcott cried. He threw up the shotgun and without aiming, pulled the trigger. The range was over fifty feet, close enough for the shotgun to do mortal damage. Detterback did not even cry out. He just went over backwards.

Westcott came down the rest of the stairs two at a time. He sprang to the horse he had selected from upstairs, jerked the reins loose from the rail and vaulted into the saddle.

CHAPTER VII

Escape!

IT was much like his retreat of a few days ago. Only now Westcott was a convicted murderer. Then he had been merely a wild cowboy. Men saw him now and plunged into buildings, away from him.

He was out of town before any pursuit was started. But then he discovered that he had overlooked one important thing—something that hadn't been present the other day. The cavalry!

They had pitched camp beside the road leading toward the Ogden Ranch and the Badlands. Westcott almost ran into the camp. He was less than a hundred feet from it when a sentry saw him and raised an alarm.

Westcott veered his horse sharply to the right and cut across the range. It was harder going for his horse here and that gave the pursuers from Two Butte a sidewise chance at him.

Bullets began cutting the air all around him. One tore through his hat, another struck his mount somewhere and made it pitch and scream with pain. But Westcott dug his heels into the horse's belly and the animal kept going. He was cold with impotent fury. He had a shotgun with one charge. At a distant range it was no good. The pursuers, some of them, at least, had rifles. They could keep a safe distance and shoot him out of the saddle—unless he could make cover.

It was getitng dark, but wasn't yet dark enough. He should have waited ten minutes longer. But Siddall might have remembered to put the key back in the desk, had he waited.

Another bullet seared his horse and he knew that the animal was ready to founder any minute. And ahead were the Parrish ranch buildings, the one direction he'd have preferred not to go. Well, why not?

There was one way to end things. Get the man behind things—Preston Parrish.

He turned the horse slightly and tore down upon the ranch buildings. There were punchers out in front of the bunkhouses, he saw, but they were standing watching, not being able to recognize him as yet and thinking, no doubt, it was one of their own cutthroats. He bore down on them, then at the last minutes jerked the horse savagely toward the sprawling adobe house.

He bounced from the horse just as the animal gave a tremendous shudder. At that instant one of the men at the bunkhouse sized up the situation and let fly a bullet at Westcott.

Westcott leaped for the door of the ranch house, tore it open and sprang inside—directly into Parrish's luxuriously furnished living-room. Judy Parrish on her way to the windows to see what was going on, stopped and stared at him in astonishment. "You!" she gasped.

"Where's your brother?" Westcott snapped.

"He—he isn't here!"

"Damn!" Westcott swore. He heard boots clumping the hard earth outside and wheeled toward the door. It was torn open from the outside and a man stuck his head in. Westcott stabbed at it with the shotgun. "Back—or I'll let you have this!"

The head disappeared.

Westcott looked savagely at Judy Parrish. "Where'd he go?"

Her nostrils were flaring and her face was red with color. But otherwise she showed no fear of him. Even though she knew what he was—an escaped convict.

"He's not here!" she repeated.

Outside Johnny Spain's high voice yelled: "Come out, Westcott, or I'm comin' in!"

The posse was out there now. In a little while the cavalry'd be here, too. It was the most desperate moment of Westcott's life. His only chance; his last. If he went back to Two Butte he'd never get another opportunity to escape. If he tried shooting it out now—well, there was no chance, either.

He took a step toward Judy Parrish. She did not retreat from him and Westcott somehow was touched by her apparent defiance. He lunged for her and caught her wrist. He had to!

"You're coming with me!" he cried. "I need you. They'll kill me otherwise!"

"Let go!" she cried suddenly. "You're hurting me!"

He jerked, not too savagely, on her wrist. With his other hand he dropped the shotgun to the floor and pulled out his Frontier Model Colt he had taken from Matt Siddall. He pressed it to her side. He wouldn't have shot for anything in the world, but she couldn't know that.

He moved to the door. He could hear men outside, horses. Many of them. "I'm coming out!" he called. "But don't shoot until you see what I've got!"

He waited a few seconds, then stepped boldly through the door.

"He's got the girl!" someone yelled.

"Yes," snapped Westcott. "You can kill me, but not quick enough so I don't send a bullet through her—Preston Parrish's sister!"

"Hidin' behind skirts!" yelled Johnny Spain's voice.

Westcott's eyes searched the twilight for the youthful killer but couldn't find him. He heard pounding hoofs approaching the ranch houses and pulled Judy Parrish out from the shelter of the veranda.

"I'm takin' a couple of horses," he

said, "and anyone chases too close—it's too bad. I'm not going to hurt Miss Parrish if I'm not hurt. But you know, all of you now, what I've got to look forward to, and you know that I mean what I say!"

There were forty or more men around the ranchyard. Not one made any move toward Westcott as he led Judy Parrish to a pair of horses. They had a healthy respect for Westcott's desperation. They could have killed him, of course. But they believed that would have sacrificed Judy Parrish, sister of Preston Parrish. And none cared to do that.

He forced her into a saddle and clung to her wrist as he mounted another horse. And, riding close together, they left the ranch house. They left at one side as troops galloped in at the other. Troops with Preston Parrish and the captain in command.

Westcott held the lines of the horse on which Judy Parrish was mounted. He kept his own mount at a terrific pace and the other was perforce obliged to keep up with it. There was pursuit, of course, but it wasn't close, and with the darkness falling about them like a dark blanket, the clatter of the pursuing horses soon died down.

Then Westcott pulled up his horse. Judy Parrish could, at that time, have leaped from her mount and tried to get away on foot. She realized the futility of it, however. Westcott could run her down in a moment.

There was something about the man that chilled her. She remembered his grim suffering of real physical pain on the stage-coach a few days ago, when blood had seeped through his lips. She added to that what she'd heard about him since arriving in Two Butte, what she had seen at the trial. She knew that a more desperate man did not live in all of Lafayette County. He had his life to lose and only his freedom to gain.

She spoke to him. "Wouldn't you be able to travel faster without me?"

He laughed harshly. "Maybe; but you don't know what a long arm your brother has in this county. I'd never get away without you as a hostage. You see, I got to the Badlands the other day and I was run down in just a few hours. This time I'm not taking any chances. . . . Oh, don't worry about yourself. I'm not going to hurt you."

She was silent for a little while, then she ventured again: "You've had a rather hard time of things, haven't you?"

"You ought to know," he retorted. "It's your brother that's made things tough for me. Is it still a secret to you that he's worse than any plague that ever hit this country?"

It was too dark now to see her face, but he imagined she winced at that thrust. She said, "He's changed since he's come West."

"So has Johnny Spain. They say he was a newsboy in New York. He came West five years ago. He's under twenty-one now and he's killed a man for every year of his life."

"Johnny Spain?" she exclaimed. "That tall blond boy?"

"Yes. What Templeton tried to bring out about him at the trial is only a small part of his record. He's the worst killer in the West."

"And he works for my brother?"

Westcott laughed harshly. He let her think about it for a while, then he said, "Why did you come out here? Did Preston send for you?"

"No. He didn't even know I was coming. He wants me to go back. I—I don't know what to do. I feel as if the whole world had fallen about me."

He tried to see her face and couldn't. Yet her tone told him what she was going through. He felt a moment of pity for her and fought it down. There would be a morning and then the hills would be swarming with hunters for him. And he had only one life. Aside from a little inconvenience the girl wouldn't be hurt. He could get through the Badlands with her at his side. On the other side of the Badlands he could let her go. At some village.

CHAPTER VIII

The Outlaw Camp

JUDY and Westcott pressed on hour after hour, stopping only to rest their horses now and then. The moon came up bright and they could see the buttes against the skyline that indicated the heart of the Badlands.

Westcott did not make the mistake tonight of taking refuge in the cabin in the blind canyon. That would be the first spot the posse would go to. But it was probably as far as they'd go while it was still dark. The country was too rough and huge from here on to go it blind. They'd have to track Westcott. They'd probably camp around here and look for trail sign in the morning.

Westcott, of course, would have to press on. There was no stopping for him. Only by traveling longer and faster than his pursuers could he hope to win through.

A half-hour beyond the deserted cabin he saw a light. But he ignored it. Keeler's men were known for their furtiveness. If no one bothered them, they seldom came out of their hiding places.

Another hour and he saw another light. In a little while he heard someone crashing about in a patch of scrubby brush. Judy Parrish could no longer contain her curiosity or fright. "There's someone around here!" she exclaimed.

"I know," he replied, "but they're men like myself. Outlaws. This country is Charlie Keeler's hideout."

"Who's he? I heard Preston mention his name."

"No one seems to know. Except that he's been in these mountains as long as I've been around here. Perhaps there isn't even such a man. But in the old days whatever happened out in the valley was blamed on Charlie Keeler. When a man went bad or disappeared, folks'd say, 'He's joined up with Charlie Keeler.' "

When they were past the light Westcott pulled up his horse and dismounted. "Better get down and stretch yourself," he said, gruffly. "You're not used to so much riding."

She wasn't. She couldn't even get off her horse. He had to lift her down. He felt a twinge of compunction about that. "Sorry," he said.

They rested for several minutes then Judy exclaimed. "There's a light—moving!"

He looked instinctively backwards, but could see nothing, only shadowy gloom. "No, over to the left," Judy said.

He saw the light then and scowled in the darkness. It was someone with a lantern. "Keep quiet," he warned. "He probably won't see us." He stepped to the horses and caught each by the nostrils ready to squeeze off any sudden neigh.

The light bobbed and winked for a minute or two, coming closer. When it was approximately fifty yards away and Westcott saw that they would be discovered he drew his gun with one hand and called out.

"All right, don't come any closer."

The lantern crashed against a tree and went out. A voice yelped, "Who're you?"

"Never mind," Westcott retorted. "Just go on about your business." He reached out and caught hold of Judy Parrish's arm to pull her behind a horse.

Flame lanced the darkness and a gun roared. Somewhere behind him Westcott heard a bullet crash into a tree. He muttered under his breath and said, "Lie down, Miss Parrish!"

She was breathing heavily, short quick pants. She moved and then someone rushed over rocky ground, heels ringing. Westcott took a quick step to the side and sent a bullet in the general direction of the man who had fired at him.

Judy screamed and Westcott whirled back. A body hurtled out from behind a tree and crashed into him. Westcott gave way before it, then smashed out with his gun. It struck a moving body. A fist reached out of the blackness and exploded on his jaw. He reeled back swinging with both hands now.

Then the entire Badlands seemed to crash down on his head. He went out completely. . . .

CONSCIOUSNESS came to Westcott in a rush. He heard voices and his body tensed. Pain lanced through him but it was a stimulant. He came to his knees. There he paused. He saw that he was in a roomful of men.

Rough men, most of them bearded and ragged. All armed heavily, almost without exception with two guns. They were all strangers to him.

"He's awake!" someone said.

Men turned. A huge, hulking man with a gray beard pushed through and stared down at him. "All right, fella, talk. Who are you and what the hell was the idea comin' snoopin' around here at night?"

Westcott climbed to his feet. "My name's Westcott. If you've been around Two Butte lately you'll know who I am."

A vicious looking fellow stepped up to the graybearded man and whispered. "Fella named Westcott's in jail in Two Butte. He can't be him."

"But I am. I broke jail. There's a posse after me!"

Several men swore at that. Graybeard mumbled. "Then what's the idea comin' here? They'll be combin' these mountains for you by morning. I don't like that a-tall."

"They won't bother you," Westcott said. He tried to peer past the men. "Where's the girl that was with me? You haven't harmed—"

"Naw," said the old man. "She's all right. Restin' in the next shack. She was right tuckered out."

"You're Charlie Keeler?" Westcott asked.

Graybeard nodded. "And so you broke jail? Who'd you kill to do it?"

Westcott hesitated. "Lou Detterback."

Someone swore. "He's knocked off the sheriff and the deputy. What a man!"

"Hell," said another, "Detterback was all right. He took orders—"

"Shut up, Yates!" snapped old Charlie Keeler. He turned around suddenly. "Clear outa here, all of you. 'Cept you, Monty, and you, Springer."

There was some grumbling but the outlaws left the cabin. The two men who remained with Keeler were vaguely familiar to Westcott. He was sure he had seen them some time or other in Two Butte. Well, that was not impossible. Someone in Keeler's gang had to buy provisions now and then. The man called Monty was short, blackbearded, fairly young. The other, Springer, was a lanky, snaggle-toothed man of almost fifty. He was cleanshaven except for long, blond mustaches.

"I don't like it, Charlie," said Springer. "Them troops aren't goin' to rest until they get him. From what I heard in town they were sent there to keep the peace. And if this louse gets away there ain't goin' to be any peace."

"There never will be, in Lafayette County," said Westcott, "until Preston Parrish is killed or driven out."

"What's the matter with Parrish?" growled Charlie Keeler.

"Nothin' that a bullet won't cure."

Springer sneered. "This is the man for whom the Ogden girl threw down Preston Parrish. That's what's made half the trouble."

"That's a lie!" snapped Westcott.

Springer made a threatening move toward Westcott. Then he backed away. "I'll fetch the girl and we'll find out some things."

"Might be a good idee," rumbled Keeler. "We got to figger out what to do with 'em before morning, anyway."

Springer slammed out of the cabin. Westcott looked steadily at Charlie Keeler then. "Funny your spies don't know that this isn't the same girl."

"What? Who's this one, then?"

"Parrish's sister."

Charlie Keeler blinked in astonishment. Then he inhaled sharply. "Parrish's sister?" he gasped. "Judy?"

Westcott was shocked by the old out-

law's tremendous astonishment and his knowledge of Parrish's sister's given name. "How do you know her name is Judy?" he asked sharply.

The door opened and Springer came in with Judy Parrish. Her eyes went immediately to Westcott and he thought there was sudden relief in them. She didn't seem frightened. Which was amazing considering that this girl had been raised in the East. The average girl under her conditions would have been swooning through half of what Westcott had forced her this evening. To be suddenly captured by a gang of almost legendary outlaws would have thrown such a girl into hysterics. But except for slightly dilated eyes Judy Parrish seemed calm and reserved.

Westcott nodded at her. Then he watched old Charlie Keeler. The outlaw had stepped close to Judy was staring into her face. Then he shook his head slowly. "Your name is Judy Parrish, ain't it?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then what're you doin' here in these mountains with this man?" demanded Charlie Keeler.

"The answer to that should be simple enough," replied Westcott. "I was hard pressed by Parrish. So I grabbed his sister to use as a hostage. There's a hundred cavalrymen out there and about fifty of Parrish's friends—all after me."

"And those soldiers'll be after us in the morning, Charlie," growled Monty. "We oughta high-tail outta here."

"Monty's right," said Springer. "We're all right as far as Parrish is concerned, but those cavalrymen. . . ."

Charlie Keeler waved a huge paw. "I'll make the decisions!" He was still staring at Judy Parrish. Westcott saw that she was becoming uneasy under the old outlaw's constant observations.

The other outlaws were becoming aware of Keeler's strange actions now. Westcott saw the man Monty wink at Springer. The latter glowered. "The boys outside don't like it. They want to beat it. And . . . ." he nodded significantly at Westcott.

"Get out!" said Keeler. "I want to talk to these two alone a minute."

Monty moved toward the door but Springer stood fast. "She *is* Parrish's sister. I think I saw her at this fella's trial the other day."

"Get out!"

The outlaw left. Then Charlie Keeler tore his eyes off Judy Parrish and regarded Westcott hostilely. "What was the idee takin' this girl along with you, Westcott?"

"I've already told you about that," replied Westcott coldly. "You don't seem to understand that I was in jail, that they were going to hang me in two weeks. What would you have done in the same circumstances?"

Charlie Keeler made a pawing motion. "Well, what the hell did you expect from me?"

"Nothing. I wasn't coming to you. I was cutting through the mountains to get out of this county. It was the safest way. Your men stopped me. Which proved one thing to me."

"What?"

"That you're in cahoots with Preston Parrish. A couple of your men saw me the other day when I was first captured. In a little while Detterback found me in a blind canyon I'd have sworn no one from the outside knew about."

"No? Then how'd you find it?"

"I've lived in the valley all my life. I used to hunt up here when I was a kid. You *are* with Parrish."

"Yes," said Judy Parrish suddenly. "I overheard Preston talking to one of those men yesterday. He—he was at the ranch yesterday. He didn't see me, but I saw him."

Charlie Keeler swiveled to look again at Judy. Then he shook his head. "You and your brother have a quarrel?" he asked.

She looked steadily at him. "No. But—" her eyes went to Westcott and for some reason he reddened.

Keeler scowled. "You think your brother's a crook, huh?"

"I'd just as soon not discuss him here!"

"Maybe it'd be better if you did, girl. You might's well find out about him. 'Cause I'm goin' to send you back to him in the mornin'."

"You?" Westcott asked.

"Yes, me. But don't you worry yourself none, Westcott. You're not goin' back. I'm goin' to save Parrish some trouble. Catch on?"

Westcott understood. Keeler meant to kill him. "Then you are with him?"

"With him?" Charlie Keeler laughed harshly. "No, *I am him.* That is, Parrish's workin' for me. In a little while he'll own the whole valley out there for me. Then I'm goin' down and take over."

"And all this feuding here for years, all the thieving and trouble that's been down in the valley, you, Keeler, you've been behind it?"

"Me and the boys. I planned it out years ago. Needed a fella to front for us. Parrish looked good to me for that. I gave him the money to start. He's come through."

CHAPTER IX

Ethel Makes a Ride

WESTCOTT'S sensational break from the Two Butte jail was less than an hour old when a rider galloped into the Ogden ranchyard and tore pell-mell into the house with the story.

Ethel was with her father at the time. Her face blanched. "They'll kill him this time. He's a convicted murderer and they won't try to capture him alive. And Preston's sister—Pres won't forgive Bob for that."

Fred Ogden swore lustily, something he never did before Ethel. "The fool! Why didn't he wait? Only today the governor promised to intercede and see that he got another trial."

"Bob didn't know that. Detterback wouldn't let any of us talk to him."

"He paid for that with his life. Well, it's all up with him now. The governor wouldn't dare do anything even if he's taken again alive."

"He won't be taken alive," Ethel said dully. "He'll fight. He's at bay. Dad, I wish you'd sold your ranch to Parrish when that trouble first began."

"I've wished that a dozen times," her father said bitterly. "I wish I'd let him have it for nothing, like he wanted. If I'd thought it would have led to all this. . . ."

Ethel paced the floor of the living-room. She had paced up and down in this room now for three days, since she'd finally surrendered to her true feelings and broken with Preston Parrish and admitted that the only man in the world for her was Bob Westcott.

And this was the finish. Westcott was out there now with a hundred men looking for him; armed men who would shoot him down as if he were a coyote.

In the middle of her pacing she suddenly stopped. She looked at her father, then turned abruptly and went to her room. Quickly she changed her light dress for a fringed riding skirt and soft doeskin boots. She got a high-peaked hat from a closet and a leather jacket. She started to leave the room then turned back and got a cartridge belt and gun. She buckled it about her.

She left the room, but by the window. Outside she walked quickly around the house to the corrals. There were several punchers around and she asked one of them to saddle her own horse. He did and volunteered to go with her.

"No," she told him, "I'm just going for a short ride."

The ride wasn't a short one though. Away from the ranch she turned her horse to the west, to the distant buttes. She knew that country as well as most people in Lafayette County, perhaps better than most.

The possemen would have to be cau-

tious; Westcott had a hostage. They would have to take him by surprise. But Ethel didn't have to be cautious. She could ride as fast and as openly as she wanted.

She wasn't afraid of the stories she'd heard of the Badlands. With a hundred outlanders scouring the Badlands Charlie Keeler and his men would take to their holes. They wouldn't molest a lone girl riding through their territory. They had enjoyed immunity for two decades by minding their own business.

She rode swiftly for an hour toward the Buttes. Then her sharp ears heard the pounding of hoofs ahead of her. She swung far to the side, put her horse to a steady lope. The possemen's horses wouldn't be any too fresh by this time. She could ride around them and get in front, between them and Westcott. Soon they'd have to stop anyway and wait for daylight to pick up Westcott's trail. He would have that advantage over them. He could penetrate far into the Badlands by morning if he kept going—and he would, of course.

She circled the pursuers in an hour and found herself on rough ground. She continued straight ahead. Westcott was traveling light, without food. He'd have to get through the Badlands as quickly as possible. And due west was the shortest way.

By midnight, although she did not know it, Ethel Ogden had passed the blind canyon in which Westcott had taken refuge a few days ago. And now, she was in the heart of Charlie Keeler's section.

She didn't know that for another half-hour. And then she saw a light ahead of her. She exclaimed aloud at sight of it. "He shouldn't!" And then she knew that he wouldn't be that foolish. Therefore the light belonged to someone else.

She turned her horse to the right, intending to circle the light. She heard the click of leather on rock and reached for the gun in her holster. She got her hand on it and a hard paw reached out of the darkness and secured her wrist.

"Easy, lady!" said a gruff voice.

At the same time another arm caught her horse's bridle. There was a fair moon and by its light Ethel could see two bearded faces.

"Who are you?" she demanded, in a voice she hoped did not tremble.

One of the ruffians chuckled. "Well, now, we was just going to ask you that question, seein's how yo're the visitor."

"The boss'll be glad to have all this company," chuckled the second man.

"Someone else's been here?" Ethel exclaimed. "A man and a girl?"

"Yep," was the reply. "You part o' their party?"

"Take me to your boss!" Ethel said.

"Shore; where else did you think we'd take you?"

They led her through a grove of trees so thick the horses had difficulty squeezing through. After a while they came to a clearing and Ethel could see a huddle of log huts. There were lights in several of them. A man challenged them and one of the outlaws with her replied:

"Got some more customers!"

"Damn!" swore the other outlaw. "We've got too many now. Just figerrin' to knock them off. What you got—another girl?"

"Yeah and she was alone."

"Looks like the Ogden girl. The old man won't be glad about that."

"I'm not glad to be here," Ethel retorted. "Let's see this old man of yours."

"Spunky kid, huh!" chuckled one of the outlaws.

They led her to the largest of the cabins, shoved her inside. "Here's another one for you, Charlie," one of the outlaws said. "Just picked her up riding alone."

"Bob!" Ethel Ogden said. She started toward Westcott, then saw Judy Parrish and stopped.

Charlie Keeler said under his breath: "Why'd you come out here?"

"Ethel," said Westcott, "you didn't come out here bacause—"

"Yes, Bob," said Ethel. "I got ahead of the posse. They won't venture into the Badlands until morning. I thought, well—"

"You're the Ogden girl," said Charlie Keeler. "The one who was supposed to marry Preston Parrish."

Ethel began a retort then caught herself. She walked over to Judy Parrish. "I've heard of you, Judy."

"And I—of you!" Judy bit her lip. Westcott, looking at the two girls, compared them mentally. Ethel Ogden was tall and blond, vibrant and plain-spoken. She had the lithe stride of the range-bred girl.

Judy Parrish was also tall, but she was dark, with a smooth complexion, almost olive. Her calmness, even under stress was remarkable. There was no hint of fright in her eyes. Captured by nortorious outlaws after her harrowing experience she was yet almost as composed as she must have been in a Boston drawing room.

Ethel smiled. "You don't hate me, do you, Judy? Just because I broke my engagement with your brother?"

Judy Parrish looked at Ethel Ogden a moment then shook her head. "No. I can understand why you did, although I didn't know you had. I didn't know about Preston's business out here even. I wouldn't have come if I had."

Charlie Keeler took exception to that. "Maybe Preston's got reasons for doing what he has. Like me. Know what they did to me twenty-five years ago?"

"I know what they should have done," retorted Westcott. "They should have hanged you."

Someone banged on the door and then pushed it open. The outlaw, Springer, followed by Monty, came into the cabin.

"What's the idee?" snapped Charlie Keeler. "I told you I wanted to talk to these folks alone."

"Too much talk already," replied Springer, truculently. "The boys want action, Be daylight in a couple of hours. We don't figure on waitin' here for the soldiers."

"I'll take care of the soldiers," said Keeler. "I've always taken care of everythin'. Now get out of here."

"All right, Keeler," snarled Springer. "I've warned you, the boys—"

"The hell with them!" cried Keeler. "Without me, most of 'em woulda been hung long ago."

Springer and Monty went out again. Keeler began pacing the floor of the little cabin. He looked now and again at Judy Parrish. But when he finally stopped it was before Ethel Ogden.

"You threw over Preston Parrish," he said. "Why?"

"I think Preston Parrish is the answer for that," she retorted. But she looked at Bob Westcott.

"But if Westcott wasn't around?" pursued the old ruffian, meaningly.

"I still wouldn't marry Preston Parrish. Ever!"

"What's all this getting you, Keeler?" demanded Westcott. "Turn us loose. In fact I'll make a deal with you. I'll let Miss Ogden ride back with Judy—"

"No, Bob, I'm going with you," cut in Ethel.

Old Charlie Keeler roared. "You two got it all figured out! Ain't I got nothin' to say around here?"

The door slammed open again. "Not much!" said a voice.

Westcott swiveled his head toward the door. Then a cold feather slithered up his spine. Johnny Spain stood in the doorway. Behind him, only his head showing, was Kim Foster.

Charlie Keeler's mouth fell open. "Spain! What the—How the devil'd you get here?"

"On my horse," grinned Johnny Spain. He looked around the room, his eyes stopping at Westcott. "Well, well, Westcott! Kinda looks like your string's run out."

It did at that. Some things he'd seen lately had given Westcott a bit of hope.

But the sudden entry of Johnny Spain and Kim Foster shattered that hope. He looked at Judy Parrish and saw her forehead crease. Johnny Spain was looking at her now.

"He treat you rough, Judy?" he asked, softly.

Judy Parrish shook her head. "No. Where's Preston?"

"He's stickin' with the soldiers," sneered Johnny Spain. "Wants to make it all legal. But he knows you're here."

"How?" snapped old Charlie Keeler.

"Woody snuck out and told us," offered Kim Foster.

Springer and Monty crowded into the room past Charlie Keeler. "We warned you, Charlie. They know where we are now."

"Parrish does," said Spain. "But wouldn't tell the soldiers."

"Even so," glowered Springer, "they'll find us. There's too many of them. We want to clear out of here."

"Go ahead," said Johnny Spain. "Anything that's to be done here, I can take care of." His eyes went from Bob Westcott to Judy Parrish.

"The prisoners?" asked Springer.

Old Charlie Keeler showed blackened teeth in a huge grin. Then he made a quick movement and a gun leaped into his hand. "I warned you, Springer. . . ."

Springer's face blanched. He took a step back. But Johnny Spain stepped in front of him. "No, Charlie!" he snapped.

"Out of the way, squirt!" said Charlie Keeler, grimly.

"Squirt!" cried Johnny Spain and his hand went to his gun, "Why, you old——"

Astonishingly, Judy Parrish's reserve left her. She took a quick step forward. "Johnny!" she cried. "You can't! He's my father!"

"Your father?" exclaimed Johnny Spain.

Charlie Keeler took a step back. The muzzle of his Frontier Model Colt drooped. His eyes turned to Judy Parrish.

"You know?" he asked, hoarsely.

"I guessed it ten minutes ago," said Judy Parrish, calmly. "You're the man who sent the money to Aunt Julia all these years . . . who had Preston come out West three years ago."

Westcott wasn't so very surprised. He, too, had been half expecting something of the sort for quite a little while. Old Charlie Keeler's surprise at seeing Judy, his evident concern for her and her brother, had been enough for Westcott.

"Ah," breathed Johnny Spain. His eyes lit up and he moistened his lips with his tongue. Westcott looking at him, took a deep breath.

Outside, a rifle split the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER X

The Cavalry Troop

AS THE only surviving active law enforcing officer of Lafayette County, Preston Parrish rode at the head of the hastily formed posse. No one disputed his leadership. His sister was in the hands of the escaped murderer. Besides, three-fourths of the posse were Parrish employees.

The cavalry troop, under Captain Murdock, rode beside the posse. Parrish would just as soon not had them along. Their numbers would aid them should it be necessary to scour the Badlands. But Parrish didn't think that would be necessary. He knew that Keeler could handle anything that came up in his territory.

The trick was to make as fast speed as possible, straight through the Badlands. Westcott wouldn't linger, so reasoned Parrish. But he had to play in with the cavalry.

When they reached the foothills, Captain Murdock rode over. "Might's well camp until morning. I've got a couple of Apaches with me who're

better than bloodhounds. They'll pick up his trail in the morning."

"I'd just as soon go right on now," said Parrish.

"I wouldn't advise it," countered Murdock. "You might wipe out the trail in the dark. Or some of my men might run across one of your scattered party and mistake him for Westcott. . . . Don't worry, these Apaches are good. Westcott'll have to stop some time with the girl. And then we'll close up on him."

"But it's *my* sister," exclaimed Parrish.

"Suit yourself, then," shrugged the captain. "But if he gets away, don't blame me."

After thinking it over Parrish decided to play along with the cavalry. He did, however, call one of his men to one side and talk to him for a few minutes. The man slipped away in the darkness, leading his horse. . . .

It was about two hours later, when Parrish, sitting around a small fire with Johnny Spain and a couple of others, was approached by a thin man who materialized out of the darkness.

"Woody!" he exclaimed. "How the devil'd you get here?"

"Through your guards," chuckled the man called Woody. "Our boys wanted me to talk to you. They got him."

"Him? Who do you mean?"

"Westcott. And your sister!"

Parrish gasped and came to his knees. "Judy's all right? Keeler—"

"Somethin' funny about him," said Woody shaking his head. "That's how come Springer sent me to see you. The boys know about the soldiers and want to light out. But Keeler's got soft all of a sudden. He keeps jawin' with the girl and this Westcott."

"He knows . . . ." muttered Parrish, under his breath.

"Knows what?" asked Johnny Spain, sharply.

Parrish shook his head. "Nothing important. I—I think I'll go back with you, Woody."

"Me, too," said Spain. "I got some unfinished business with this here Westcott."

Captain Murdock chose that time to stroll over to the possemen's camp. "Hello, Parrish," he said. "How's things?"

Then Parrish realized that he couldn't slip away from the camp. He had to be here at dawn. He bit his lip savagely and talked bluntly to the cavalry captain. The latter soon went back to his own camp.

Parrish turned then to Johnny Spain. "I've got to stick here and play out this game. But you, Johnny, you ride down to Keeler's camp. See that Judy's all right."

"That will be a pleasure!"

Parrish's eyes narrowed. "You been makin' up to Judy, Johnny?"

"Me?" Spain was all innocence. "Naw! I was talkin' about Westcott. He sassed me the other day. I been waitin' for a chance at him."

"Well, this is it. And tell Keeler that I'll see him some time tomorrow. To talk over final matters. He'll know what I mean."

"Uh-huh, so do I."

Johnny Spain melted away into the darkness. There was no sleep after that for Preston Parrish. He sat by the little fire glaring savagely into it. He seemed to have a premonition of something.

Fifteen minutes after Spain had gone Captain Murdock came storming over to Parrish's camp. "One of my Apache scouts just came in. He found this Keeler's camp and he claims they have three prisoners, a man and two girls."

Parrish stared at the cavalryman. "What?"

Murdock repeated his statement. "It's Westcott all right. We don't have to wait for morning now. In fact this darkness will help us. From what I've heard of this Keeler he'll fight us. I'm going to move up on him right away."

"No!" cried Parrish. "You mustn't do that. They—why, my sister might be hurt."

"I don't think so," said the captain

curtly. "Even Keeler wouldn't do that. This is the best chance we'll have to get Westcott. And we might make a clean sweep of these hill outlaws at the same time. And that's part of my job, too. We're going now. You can come along or stay behind, as you please."

There was no choice. Parrish routed out his posse, got them mounted and actually moved forward ahead of the troop of cavalry. He kept his posse going at a breakneck pace. But Captain Murdock had no intention of letting a local posse beat his cavalry. His Apache knew the way to Keeler's camp and, riding independently, the troop pressed forward into the mountains.

CHAPTER XI

Killer's Man

N THE camp of Charlie Keeler there was mad confusion. The outlaws had been caught by surprise. But they slept with their guns. With the first shot fired by one of their own guards the outlaws were up and dashing for cover. And they had plenty of it.

Their camp was inside a bottleneck canyon. With boulders, trees and natural protection a small force could stand off a considerably larger one for some time. And should defeat seem inevitable, the small force could make a handy retreat through the canyon to the exit at the far end. Their sides were safe. To come around from the back end of the canyon was almost impossible. It couldn't be done in one day, at least.

There were more than twenty men in Keeler's gang. They deployed behind boulders and sent a withering fire into the darkness where the combined forces of Preston Parrish and the cavalry were making an attack. The fire from Parrish's posse was negligible.

Several men immediately stormed into Charlie Keeler's cabin. "What about it, Charlie?" they demanded. "We goin' to beat it?"

"Yes," said Charlie Keeler. "Tell the boys to get ready."

"No," interrupted Springer. "We ain't goin' yet. We got things to do first."

"Springer!" cried old Charlie Keeler. "Who the hell gave you any authority—"

He started to lift his Colt and found Springer's staring him in the face. "I'm takin' over," Springer said softly. "The boys're with me. We're goin' to make a new deal all around. You and Parrish have been splittin' all the gravy these last two-three years while we been doin' the dirty work. All right, now we cash in. Cough up the boodle, Keeler, that you got salted away. Maybe we'll *let* you surrender then."

Monty stepped around behind Keeler and tore the gun from the old outlaw chief's hand. The outlaws who had come into the shack expressed approval. Johnny Spain and Kim Foster standing to one side, said nothing.

"You're crazy, Springer," exclaimed Keeler. "You think I've got a cache? I haven't. The money we made from the stock we rustled, why—that went to Parrish. He needed it out there."

"Fine," said Springer. "We'll just wave a white flag and let Parrish come talk it over. I think he'll be willing to go to Two Butte and get the money if we keep his old man and sister here."

"You're forgettin' the cavalry out there, boys," put in Johnny Spain. "Preston wouldn't want them to know about the arrangement here."

"That's his tough luck. The game's played out here and we figure to get our share and beat it. Let Parrish talk himself out of things. He's a damn good talker."

"It's no good, Springer," said Keeler. "You can't get away with it."

"We can't lose," sneered Springer. "The cavalry'll be satisfied with Westcott, here. We'll let them have him."

"Mighty generous of you, Springer," said Johnny Spain.

"You're stickin' with Parrish?" asked Springer, looking at the youthful killer.

"I'm playin' my own side," said Spain. "Step outside with me and I'll make a private deal with you."

Springer looked at the killer through slitted eyes. Then he shrugged. "All right." He went out with Spain. Westcott edged over to the two girls.

"I don't like this," he said.

"I know," said Judy Parrish. "I've seen Spain's eyes on me. He—"

"He wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Ethel Ogden.

"I wish I had a gun," said Westcott.

Bewildered old Charlie Keeler came over. He walked like a man in a dream. He couldn't seem to grasp what had happened.

"Judy," he mumbled. "I—I ain't been much good. You're mother left me twenty years ago because—"

"I know," said Judy Parrish, quietly. She was the most composed person in the room. There was a fatalistic calmness about her.

Springer and Johnny Spain came in again. The latter was smirking. "It's all settled, boys," he said. "I'm throwin' in on your side. Send for Parrish."

Springer spoke to one of the outlaws and the man ran outside. In a few minutes there was a lull in the firing. "He'll be comin' in a minute," said Springer. "You'll be goin' out then, Westcott."

"It'll be a relief to get back to the jail," said Westcott.

"You ain't goin' to jail," said Johnny Spain. "You said some things to me I ain't forgot. And I didn't like what you done to Miss Judy here."

"You haven't heard me complain," Judy Parrish said suddenly. "Perhaps he had reason to do what he did."

Johnny Spain glowered at Judy. "I don't git you."

"Perhaps I went with him willingly."

The killer's mouth fell open. "Judy!" he said, hoarsely. "That's a lie! Say it is, or—"

Westcott, watching the tableau, fascinated, saw Judy Parrish walk deliberately toward Johnny Spain. Her face for a moment was imperturbable. Then, slowly, it broke into a smile.

"Yes, it is a lie," she said, deliberately. "I just wanted to hear what you'd say, Johnny."

Johnny Spain's face beamed. He started to reach for Judy and then Preston Parrish stepped into the room, a couple of outlaws at his heels.

"What's gone on here?" he snapped, truculently. "I don't like it at all."

"That's just fine," chuckled Springer. "Mose, get his guns!"

But Preston Parrish stepped swiftly to one side and faced the outlaws. "Wait a minute!" he cried. "I want to know what's what."

"They know, Preston!" said old Charlie Keeler. "That—that you're my son!"

"All right, what of it? We've got this thing licked, anyway."

"Have you now?" taunted Springer. "Look around at the setup. Spain and Foster have thrown in with us."

"Johnny!" cried Parrish.

Johnny Spain grinned. "I made a deal. You been too stingy with your pay. Besides, I kinda took a shine to your sister and she's willin'—"

"Spain!" cried Parrish. "I'll kill you for that!"

"Start shootin' any time you're ready," taunted the killer.

"Let him go, Johnny," said Judy Parrish. She smiled brilliantly at the young killer and stepped up to him. Her left hand touched Johnny's right, and suddenly her other hand clutched at Johnny Spain's left-hand gun. It brought it out of the holster.

Johnny Spain cried out. Westcott, who had been watching closely, made a tremendous leap toward Spain and Judy Parrish. He clawed at Judy Parrish's hand and tore Spain's gun from it.

With his other hand he shoved violently against Judy, knocked her sprawling to the floor.

"All right, Spain!" he said, ringingly. "Go—"

Johnny Spain, his face distorted with rage, went for his right-hand gun. He was the fastest man Westcott had ever seen in action. If Westcott had been compelled to draw a gun from his holster, against Spain, he would never have made it. As it was, he barely beat Spain to the first shot.

The bullet hit the killer in the chest even as his gun came free of leather. He fired once at Westcott and the bullet grazed Westcott's thigh.

Then another gun thundered in the room and blood spurted from Spain's face. That was Preston Parrish, both guns in his hands.

And now the room exploded into an inferno. It contained, besides Westcott and Parrish, Keeler, Springer, Monty, Kim Foster and three of Springer's pack.

After Westcott's first bullet had hit Johnny Spain, Westcott sprang quickly to Ethel Ogden's side and shielded her with his body. He heard her gasp and thought he saw her drop to the floor, but he wasn't sure. He was suddenly busier than he had ever been in his life. Everyone seemed to be shooting, suddenly.

Springer was down on a knee. Monty was sprawling on the floor, but still shooting. Kim Foster stood by the door a gun in each hand, shooting methodically. Old Keeler roared and stumbled against Foster, spoiling his aim and taking a bullet in return.

Parrish was bleeding from the mouth, but still standing squarely on both feet and firing with both hands. An outlaw screamed and plunged forward. He collided with Westcott and the latter slammed him with his gunbarrel. The outlaw went down at Westcott's feet, clawing at him.

An invisible fist smashed Westcott in the left shoulder and knocked him back. He went down to his knees, pulled trigger and it was a full second before he realized there had been no recoil, no explosion. The gun was empty.

A hot iron seared his ribs and he fell forward to the floor. The squirming outlaw on the floor butted Westcott. Westcott hit him across the forehead with Spain's empty gun, then scooped up the outlaw's own weapon.

And then suddenly the cabin was still; from the shooting at least. Springer was dead. Johnny Spain was lying in a huddle. Monty sat against the wall, sightless eyes staring across the room.

The outlaw in front of Westcott was moaning. The only man in the room still on his feet was Preston Parrish. He was standing, feet wide apart, as if he feared to move. Blood was streaming down his face.

"Pres!" said old Keeler from across the room. He was on hands and knees on the floor.

"Dad!" replied Parrish. He took a step forward and fell on his face. Judy Parrish screamed hysterically. At last she had broken.

Ethel Ogden scrambled toward Westcott on hands and knees. "Got to close the door!" she said. "They'll come back!"

Kim Foster and the survivors of the gunfight had ducked outside.

Westcott reached for Ethel with the hand that held the outlaw's gun. "They won't come back," he said. "Listen!"

Outside, above gunfire, a bugle sounded. "The cavalry's charging. The outlaws won't stand up against it."

AFTER an absence of almost seven months, Westcott was back at the Ogden Ranch. But not in the bunkhouse this time. In the big adobe ranch house. He sat on the veranda looking at the activities of the ranch. His left arm was in a sling.

Dr. Toban, putting things into a black bag, chuckled. "Rest and quiet, I told you a while ago. Maybe that's the trouble with some folks. They get too much rest and quiet. Now you, I wouldn't say exactly that you'd been havin' it, but you're better now than when you came out of the hospital."

Westcott laughed. "Comin' out next week, Doc, to the wedding?"

"Try to keep me away!" Dr. Toban chuckled again and walked to his horse. Westcott watched him ride off.

Ethel Ogden came out of the house, looking cool in a pale blue print dress. Westcott reached for her with his well hand and she took it in both of hers. She leaned against him for a moment. Then she said, "Judy left for the East today. I wish she could have stayed."

Westcott shook his head. "Lafayette County wasn't very kind to her, poor kid. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if she comes back some time. I hear Jeff Mosely, who works at the bank, has been out to see her. I guess Jeff was just about the first person to talk to her in this country."

After a while a buckboard pulled up before the veranda. A breezy, stocky man leaped to the ground.

"'Member me?" he asked. "My name's Papke. I'm sellin' thrashin' machines. . . ."

"Come around next week, Mr. Papke," said Bob Westcott. "We may buy one of your machines. Things seem pretty quiet in Lafayette County and we might be able to do a bit of farming."

Fred Ogden came out of the house. He looked at Westcott and Ethel and waved to the salesman. "C'mon around to my office. Can't you see the folks here don't want to talk business—now!"

Papke looked at Bob and Ethel. They did not seem to be very inconvenienced by the sling Bob's arm was in. The salesman sighed and turned away. . . .

Bob finally stopped kissing Ethel and they looked at the rolling range ahead of them.

"It's been scarlet with blood so long, my darling, it'll seem nice to have it green with growing things. I think I'll get you one of Papke's thrashin' machines for a wedding present."

"You do, Bob Westcott, and I'll shoot you in the other arm," she laughed and touselled his hair happily.

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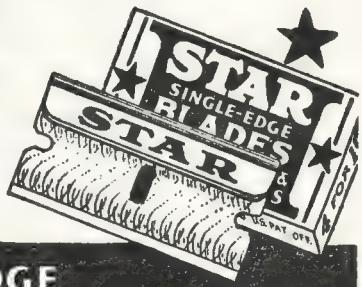

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A Fool and His Dinero

By Robert Dale Denver

No sensible man would buy gold bricks and salted mines—but Chloe's bronc-buster wanted to, and so she set out to save him from his folly. Chloe was *so* practical!

"BUT I've no intention of marrying Chance Adams or anyone else!" exclaimed Chloe Burnett.

Oldish "Skidoo" Burnett looked skeptically at his daughter, perched, a slim little figure, on the veranda rail of the big ranch house. "The road to marriage license clerks is paved with intentions of pretty girls to not git married," he observed with a sage air. Skidoo Burnett, who was accounted the richest and foxiest jasper between the Two-Paws and Four-Paws mountain ranges, was always observing something with a sage air.

From the time his daughter had been left motherless Skidoo had hammered into her head that one must be practical. And lately, since Chloe had turned nineteen, that being practical is not enough: One must also marry a practical person. An impractical husband, such as Chance Adams who broke broncs for Skidoo, would simply grate

on the nerves of a practical wife until romance fell flat as a tortilla.

Chloe could believe that, for already Chance's careless, reckless ways annoyed her no end. For she was intensely practical, despite the pretty face and honey-colored sleek hair that goes with girls usually considered a little empty-headed.

"Now this here Chance," Skidoo went on briskly, "he don't drink nor hell around, and he's a worker and not afraid of man, horse or devil. But he's the breed shell-game men and oil stock salesmen git fat on. Jist like his dad what come out West from Massachusetts. It's queer; I always heard Yankees were smart. When I think how 'Mittens' Magruder sawed off a salted gold mine on Chance's pop thirty years ago. . . . Tsk! Tsk!

"Nossir, I got nothing against Chance 'cept you wouldn't be happy with him. You're like me, Chloe—practical, sharp, impossible to fool. That's why I got rich. And us Burnetts, we're not exactly crazy about money either; we ain't miserly. We jist want to know where the next meal is coming from—"

"And when," added Chloe, who frankly enjoyed sinking two perfect rows of teeth into nice juicy steaks. Chloe wished vaguely she could pick some flaw in her father's lecture. But she couldn't. She was too practical. "Chance sure isn't smart when it comes to money," she admitted. "He's so innocent and trusting that anybody could flim-flam him."

"I knew you'd realize that," said Skidoo with a satisfied look. "But sometimes when I notice the way you two look at one another, I've been a mite uneasy. I just heard he inherited three thousand dollars from a aunt back in Massachusetts. Now you watch; he'll try to run them three thousand up to ten in a month, and fall boom on his nose. Before he's done I bet he'll be investing in one of Mittens Magruder's salted mines same as his pa done thirty years ago."

Skidoo drifted away, and Chloe, lured by the odor of fresh doughnuts, headed along the veranda for the kitchen where Wing Wo ruled. Around the corner she nearly stumbled over Hidalgo Herrick lolling in a big chair of laced rawhide, his eyes closed. Hidalgo Herrick, half-English, half-American and born in Mexico, was an oil prospector of about forty lazy summers. He had been making geological surveys in the Two-Paws—Four-Paws country, but on many days he had visited the Burnett ranch instead. Hidalgo sat up now, yawning, smiling sleepily at Chloe.

"Got the siesta habit down in Mexico," he apologized. "I don't think there's any oil in this country, anyway. And when I look at you, Chloe, I don't care if there is or not."

Hidalgo was as full of compliments as the proverbial dog is full of proverbial fleas. Fuller. Chloe shed them as a duck sheds a gentle shower. Hidalgo was the kind who asks every pretty girl he meets to marry him—particularly if she has a rich father.

With four fat doughnuts filched from under Wing Wo's nose, Chloe went to the horse corral where Chance Adams was breaking out a string of wild broncs. Chance was decidedly handsome, with curly chestnut hair and eyes that were as blue and trusting as a child's. When they looked at Chloe, she found them disturbing.

"I've just heard of your inheritance," she said as she handed him two of the doughnuts.

"Oh, that," said Chance airily. He spoke as if all his aunt had left him had been the family photograph album.

"Three thousand dollars is a lot of money," said Chloe practically. "Enough to lease a small ranch and buy a few cattle to stock it. Meanwhile you could keep on working for Dad, and use the wages to help build up a herd."

"That's to blamed slow," Chance said jauntily as he bit into a doughnut. "If I started out in the cow business, I figure that by the time I made my first

hundred thousand dollars I'd be an old man."

"Just how old do you figure you'd be?" Chloe asked curiously.

"Twenty-six, at least. No, I'm out to make quick money."

"Are you?" said Chloe coldly. "How?"

Chance waved a doughnut toward the Mexican Border. "Maybe running guns. They're storming up for a revolution down there and the profit on contraband rifles is a thousand per cent. Or I might go into dope smuggling, with diamonds and Chinks on the side."

His face was grave but his blue eyes were twinkling. He was kidding, of course, but it made her angry to see good advice wasted. "All right," Chloe snapped. "Go on, lose your money and work for wages all your life. How can you be so foolish, Chance? Fortunes aren't made overnight. I've already heard someone predict you'll lose your inheritance within a month."

"Skidoo, eh?" he guessed. "Judging by the money my father lost when he came West. But Dad was a tenderfoot and he trusted men who pretended to be his friends. I'll keep my eyes open; I learned a lot from Dad."

"You could learn a lot from my father, too," said Chloe.

"Skidoo's too conservative," returned Chance easily. "He's turned down propositions that would have made him a millionaire. Like that half-interest he could have had in the Eighty-eight Mine."

"He's turned down a heap of bad propositions, too," Chloe defended her father, while anger rose in her at the airy know-it-all attitude Chance was taking.

Chance grinned and started on the second doughnut. "All right. You can say you told me so when I come to the back door asking for a hand-out. I'm not quitting my job here; just taking a few days off now and then to look over investments. There's a lot of swell money-making opportunities layin' around."

"Just waiting for a smart young man like you to pick up," said Chloe with sarcasm. "Why won't you be sensible?"

Chance's grin became wider. "Because all my life I've heard that a fool is soon parted from his money, and I want to see if I am a fool. And while it may be true as Robert Burns said that 'many a mickle makes a muckle,' I've never heard of anyone doing anything very exciting with a muckle after they got it. Seriously, I want to make a lot of money, Chloe, so I can ask you to marry me. I've got to gamble for something big. I want to show your dad that I can take care of you."

He wasn't kidding any longer; his eyes showed that. It was sweet of him, but it was foolish, too. All he had to do was to show that he could be sensible with money. If only he were—well, practical like the Burnetts. For she'd known Chance a long time and she had liked him a lot. She'd go even further, sometimes her heart turned a queer little flip flop just at seeing him. And sometimes she could be merely riding alongside him and suddenly feel so happy that tears came to her eyes.

Maybe if Mr. and Mrs. Adams had given their little son some other name than Chance he wouldn't be so reckless, so willing to take a gamble. She'd seen him, on a dare, slip up on the backs of unbroken horses, riding them without saddle or hackamore. Taking risks was in his blood.

No, Skidoo was right. The girl that married Chance Adams would always be worried about money matters. He needed a business guardian, but no girl wanted to be a guardian to the man she married. Not of course that she was thinking of getting married!

"He's hopeless," she told her father that evening. "He'll lose his inheritance to the first shell-game artist who corners him. I can't respect anyone with so little commonsense."

"How could you," said Skidoo, "being a Burnett and practical? A fool and his dinero—"

At which his daughter flared up sur-

prisingly. "Chance isn't a fool!" she burst out. "And he and his money haven't parted yet."

"Hmm," said Skidoo Burnett aloud, and then to himself: "So it's as serious as that, is it?"

BASED on reports of Chance's inheritance from his New England aunt, Chance Adams became the most popular cowboy in the country within a week. Men on horseback and in livery rigs flocked to see him. Some were inventors, offering investments in divining rods to locate gold and silver, perpetual motion machines, and giant windmills to produce power. Two owned maps to buried treasure. Chance talked to them all between riding broncs.

The notorious seller of salted mines, Mittens Magruder, came by, and next day Chance went up Gold Canyon with him to look over one or more of Magruder's string of worthless mines, including the big Peacock.

When Chance returned, Chloe noticed that he was excited, eager, as if he already saw the enormous body of gold ore that the smooth-talking Mittens made people believe existed in his properties. It made Chloe sick. You would think that after one's father had lost money to that same slicker, even a half-wit would have enough brains to stay away from him.

Chance had brought back with him a sackful of samples. Of course there would be gold in them; Mittens Magruder would have made sure of that. Mittens had over the years hooked half a dozen suckers with his big Peacock Mine alone. All of them after buying had put in a lot of money sinking the shaft deeper and running drift tunnels. Tens of thousand of tons of rock had been taken out and lay in a big dump below the shaft house. After the Peacock proved to be a white elephant rather than a bird, Magruder had always got it back again for unpaid taxes—to resell to another unwary investor.

But Chloe held her tongue. She was through offering unwanted advice. Which did not keep her from boiling inwardly when she saw Mittens drop in every day or so to talk to Chance. Meanwhile he went on with his job of bronc breaking, except that one day he rode away with Hidalgo Herrick, the oil prospector. Hidalgo wanted to be guided into some remote corner along the Border, and good-naturedly Chance volunteered to take him. . . .

Mittens Magruder was waiting for Chance when he returned, and that night the bronc-rider and the mining man talked for a long time. Chloe overcame her scruples to maneuver close enough to get an earful. Chance was taking a week's option on the big Peacock. This surprised her. Chance's inheritance was surely not large enough to buy the Peacock, which Mittens had once sold for fifty thousand dollars. She had figured Mittens was sawing off one of his smaller properties on Chance. He wasn't actually buying it yet, but plainly he was just as good as hooked.

Chloe had washed her hands of him, but saying you washed your hands of someone was one thing; doing it was another. She found herself spending a sleepless night over the impractical goof.

She confided her fears to her father next morning during Skidoo's simple, plain breakfast, consisting simply of an enormous T-bone steak with three plain fried eggs on top, sailing in an ocean of fried potatoes.

"Hmph!" said Skidoo. "I didn't think he had enough money to buy the Peacock. But he might as well drop his inheritance down Mittens' mine as some other way. A fool and his dinero are—"

"I think it's a shame that you don't do something," said Chloe. "You know old Mittens Magruder is a crook; that he's salted the Peacock Mine a half-dozen times and sawed it off on someone. You could warn old Mittens to lay off; he's afraid of you."

Skidoo studied his daughter keenly.

"I thought you were too practical to worry about what happens to the money of a nut. And I got a hunch Chance isn't going to lose his money to old Mittens anyway. I overheard some talk between Chance and Hidalgo after they got back from that ride. Chance is going to be hooked with another skin-game scheme first and he won't have any money to pay Mittens for that mine."

"What skin game is that?" she asked

Skidoo chuckled. "The oldest one in the world! They're fixin' to sell Chance a gold brick with the old Mexican Indian buried treasure angle. It's a trick that's been played along the Border ever since the Spanish crossed the ocean and rode in here in their tin-can armor."

"What's Hidalgo got to do with it?"

"He's the puller-in, the feller that ropes the sucker for the other feller to hogtie. They're going to rig it up in that old deserted shack in Skeleton Canyon tonight. Chance and Hidalgo are ridin' down to meet the party with the gold brick, and I'm going to sneak down and listen in. You better go with me, as I kinda think you're still fond of Chance, and seeing what a knot-head he is would cure you."

"It might," admitted Chloe. It was a heartless way to look at it, but her father was right. Chloe, being a very practical person, wouldn't be happy married to a man so dumb as to fall for the old gold-brick game. . . .

The sky was studded with stars as she rode with her father toward Skeleton Canyon, just the kind of night on which Chloe had ridden with Chance over the mesas to dances, coming home sleepy and tired and happy, to the music of beating hoofs. These memories, her practical nature realized, meant more than they should.

Skeleton Canyon was thick with brush and chaparral, and lying close to the Border, it was as spooky a place as its name indicated. Chloe was glad her father had taken his six-shooter.

There was only one house in the canyon, a little adobe built by a smuggler years before, a one-room affair with both windows out and the door sagging on its hinges. Cowboys used it for a shelter camp on round-ups.

Skidoo and Chloe tied their horses back in the brush a quarter of a mile from this shack, and walked to the back of the building and waited. After a while they heard the pad of hoofs coming up-canyon from the Border, and a lone horseman leading a pack animal dismounted before the door.

After unsaddling and unpacking and hobbling his horses, the rider carried his gear and pack panniers inside and, lighting a small candle, stuck it on a rickety table in front of the stone fireplace. Skidoo and Chloe, hidden in the brush a short distance away, could see him plainly. A Mexican, mostly Indian, judging by his flat features and coarse, straight hair, dressed in sandals, cheap cotton shirt and pants.

A LITTLE later two horsemen rode down the canyon. Chance and Hidalgo Herrick. Hidalgo gave a peculiar whistle which the Indian, stepping to the door, answered with an owl hoot. "That crook Hidalgo," thought Chloe angrily, "leading an innocent, trusting bronc-buster into a gold-brick game!"

The Indian shook hands with the two, exchanged a few grunted words with Hidalgo, who evidently understood his tongue, and took them into the cabin. Stooping over his panniers, the Indian brought out a paper-covered heavy parcel and, placing it on the table by the candle, unwrapped it.

Revealed, it was a flat piece of metal, roughly nine or ten inches long, four or so wide, a couple of inches thick. In the light of the candle flame it glowed richly yellow. It looked like gold, and, if it were, that chunk was worth a lot of money.

The Indian talked in his grunting

tongue, while his wrinkled old hands caressed the yellow block.

"He says," Hidalgo Herrick interpreted for Chance, "that he is the last member of an Indian tribe, the Ixtecs. That long ago when the Spaniards first came into Mexico the Spanish enslaved the Ixtecs and set 'em to work digging gold. Until finally the Indians rose up and butchered the Spanish and destroyed all trace of the mine and buried the gold the Spanish had melted into bars. All this time the gold's been kept hid, but now this old Indian needs money, and he's willing to trade one of the pieces for good silver pesos."

Chance then asked a natural question that Chloe was dying to ask herself. "Why doesn't he sell it in Mexico?"

Hidalgo spoke to the Indian, and the Indian burst out into indignant talk.

"He says," said Hidalgo, "the officials down there would grab the gold for themselves and kill him. He's right, Chance; I've lived in Mexico long enough to know that. That's why he wants to sell it to an American."

"How much does he want for it?" asked Chance.

"Ten thousand pesos. If it's pure gold, that would be less than a third of what it would bring you at a mint. If I had the money, I'd buy it myself in a second, having known this Indian in Mexico and being able to stake my life he's honest. It's odd I happened to run across him when we rode out together."

"Yes, very odd," thought Chloe ironically. Why didn't Chance see through their game?

"I haven't got the ten thousand pesos," said Chance. "The story about the size of my inheritance is a little stretched. I'll give two thousand American dollars. That's all I have."

Hidalgo interpreted this offer for the Indian, who gave a single negative grunt. But Hidalgo argued and finally the Indian capitulated.

"He says he'll take it," said Hidalgo.

"I don't like to take advantage of an ignorant Indian," said Chance, and at that Skidoo gave Chloe's arm a little pinch to emphasize the joke.

"That old fella was selling fake gold bricks to suckers before Chance was born," whispered Skidoo. "It's jist like takin' candy from a kid."

"Don't let that stop you," urged Hidalgo Herrick. "Two thousand dollars is a lot of Mexican pesos, enough to make him rich. I envy you your opportunity, that is, of course, if you find out that this is gold."

"It sure looks like gold," said Chance trustfully, blinking his blue eyes at the hunk of yellow metal. "But I guess I ought to have it assayed first."

"Naturally," said Herrick smoothly. "Nobody would buy without having it assayed first. Even if you tested it with acid, you'd want to make sure it's gold all the way through. That's why I said we'd bring along a drill to get a sample for an assay."

Hidalgo was smooth all right. Chance nodded, unable to take his eyes from that square block of yellow metal. "I can have the drillings assayed in Kingston tomorrow," Chance said, "but how can I tell when I come back to buy the bar that it's the same brick I had assayed? The Indian could imitate the holes in a fake brick and sell the fake one to me."

Chloe had to admit that Chance was showing a little glimmer of sense.

Hidalgo traded talk with the old Indian. "He says he'll drill three holes now and after you assay the drillings to come back day after tomorrow with a friend. And that he'll drill another hole in the brick then, and you can send your friend out to have an assay made of that while you stay here with the Indian watching to see that he doesn't change bricks. If the second assay is all right, you can then pay over the money and take the brick."

Chance produced a brace and a small steel bit from a chaps pocket and the Indian set to work. Herrick held the ends of the slab while the Indian drilled where Chance indicated, per-

spiration gathering on the old fellow's leathery face. He drilled two deep holes on one side of the block and one on the other. Then Chance carefully gathered the tiny yellow shavings and, putting them in an envelope, slipped the envelope into a shirt pocket. His face was flushed with excitement.

"Tell him," Chance ordered Herrick, "that I'll meet him here day after tomorrow in the morning—if I find this sample O. K. I'll bring the money, but I won't pay it over until he's drilled another hole and I send someone off to have that assayed. We'll leave the brick on the table while we're waiting."

Hidalgo interpreted to the Indian and put the Indian's reply into English. "He says it is all satisfactory and that he is your friend. And that he never stole from a friend; that he has too much honor to cheat a friend although he's just a poor ignorant Ixtec."

"Standing here waiting for a street car," wise-cracked Skidoo to Chloe in a whisper as, again shaking hands with the Indian, Hidalgo and Chance rode off.

When the sound of their horses' hoofs had died away, the Indian brought out a second flat heavy paper-wrapped object from a pannier and unwrapped it, revealing a twin block to the one Chance had drilled. Then with the brace and bit which Chance had left, the Indian drilled three holes in the second brick, matching the other three. Finished that, he drilled a fourth.

This hole, Chloe realized, would correspond to the fourth that he would drill in the first brick when Chance returned to take a second sample. A clever enough scheme to fool really smart men, she thought, as she and her father watched the Indian pry out a wide stone from the wall of the fireplace and, slipping the two bars of metal into the cavity, replace the stone.

In the canyon a bird twittered sleepily and peacefully. The old Indian's face cracked in a smile. "And that's that," he remarked aloud.

"Why the dirty crook! He even speaks English," muttered Chloe.

The Indian spread blankets on the dirt floor, preparing to sleep, and the Burnetts returned noiselessly to their horses.

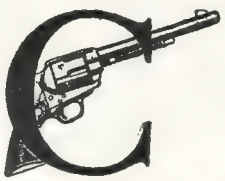
"It's simple to see how they'll work it," said Skidoo as they rode. "The brick they drilled really is gold; the other is fake. When the Indian drills a fourth hole day after tomorrow, it will be in the real bar too, so that will assay gold. But while Chance is staying here with the brick on the table waiting for his friend to come back with the report, a pal of the Indian will switch the fake bar for the gold one."

"You'll warn Chance of course," said Chloe. "Or get the sheriff."

"I got a better scheme to beat those buzzards," said her father. "We'll let Chance go through with the deal, but I'll see that he gets his money back. Me, I'm sharp enough to hatch out a idea to make some profit for myself out of this. I deserve some pay for being a guardian to a simple-minded bronc-buster."

"How are you going to save his money?" asked Chloe.

"Just leave it to me," said Skidoo, and Chloe had to be satisfied with that.



CHANCE did not return to the Burnett ranch that night nor the next day; he was off getting his gold samples assayed. He didn't show up the second night either, nor did Skidoo, who had ridden away early in the morning to buy some cattle over on Snake Creek. Chloe spent a wakeful night. In the morning Skidoo had not yet returned and she ate nothing for breakfast. Chance was doubtless riding with his inheritance to hand it over to Hidalgo and his fellow crook as soon as he had the report from the second assay.

In mid-morning Chloe decided that

Skidoo, busy with his cattle deal, had been held up or had forgotten all about Chance. Or maybe he had just decided to let Chance lose his money. That left only one person to save him—Chloe Burnett.

She would ride down to the cabin and tell Chance that he was being cheated. He wouldn't thank her for it, but she'd do it anyway because of—well, because of friendship. And just in case the Indian got mad or she should run into Hidalgo, she put a six-shooter in her saddle holster.

Reaching Skeleton Canyon, she decided to tie her horse back in the brush again and steal quietly up to the shack. She was beginning to be more and more uncertain about the wisdom of open interference. Chance would be angry with her—and yet she couldn't bear to have him flimflammed. It was not only the money so much as that being a sucker in a gold-brick swindle would make him a laughing stock. And maybe he wouldn't pay any attention to her at all and be taken in anyway.

The Indian and Chance, Chloe found by a cautious survey, were sitting outside the house in the shade of a wall, the little shack at midday being as hot as a bake oven. Chance's horse was staked out grazing in a little open space some distance away.

Peering through the back window from which the panes and sash had disappeared long before, she saw the bar wrapped loosely in paper and lying in the middle of the table. On a sudden impulse she slipped noiselessly in over the windowsill and tiptoed over the floor to the fireplace.

Hastily she tugged at the rock which the Indian had opened two nights before and, after breaking only one fingernail, managed to pull it out. Bringing out the heavy block, wrapped similarly to the other, she quickly exchanged it with the one on the table, putting the bar that had been on the table into the hole and shoving in the stone again.

Now it would be the real gold bar that Chance would receive when he paid over his money.

A jingle of spurs came and she froze for a moment. That would be Chance, but the sound was away from the house luckily. Chloe flew back over the windowsill and, hastily making her way to her horse, raced out of the canyon.

She had done her duty as a friend; had saved Chance's money. Of course Chance wouldn't know it now or ever. The simp would pat himself on the back as a shrewd hombre. Well, let him. No, that wouldn't do. She'd tell him how she had saved his money for him, and maybe it would induce him not to hand the money over to Mittens Magruder for the Peacock Mine.

Warmed with the satisfaction of her good deed, and with the superior feeling that a smart, practical person has for the sucker tribe, she unsaddled and raided Wing Wo's kitchen.

Her father rode in just before supper. Skidoo looked well pleased with himself; evidently he had made a shrewd deal on the cattle. He chuckled to himself as he washed, and he was still chuckling when the two sat down to their evening meal.

"I suppose you've forgotten all about Chance," she remarked acidly. "After you said you'd see that he didn't lose his money!"

Skidoo only chuckled again. "No, I didn't forget. I thought of a way by which Chance could skin that Indian and Hidalgo. Nossir, I didn't forget Chance; I jist fixed it so that Chance will get the brick that is real gold 'stead of the fake one."

Chloe stopped with a forkful of food half-way to her mouth. "Just how?" she asked with a sudden sinking right where the forkful of food would have landed.

"You'd never guess!" chortled skidoo. "It jist come to me that 'stead of bringing out a sheriff I slip down there and switch bars." And then he looked at Chloe hard. "Say, you didn't ride down to Skeleton Canyon today?"

"It happens I did," Chloe said dully. "Did you ever think that the same brilliant idea might occur to someone else? I switched the bars, too, so that it's exactly as if there had never been any switch. So that Chance got the fake one after all. And you and I who are *so* practical, we've just practically stolen that money from Chance."

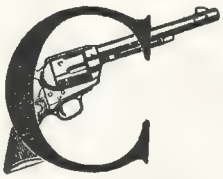
"Wait, hold on!" said Skidoo. "We did it for the best; our intentions was good."

"Sure," said Chloe, "and the road to the hot place is paved with good intentions." She shoved her plate aside angrily. "And now he'll lose all his money, and it's all our fault! We drove him into it; he knew that you'd be against my marrying him because he couldn't look out for himself in money matters. And he wanted to prove that he could."

"It wouldn't make any difference anyway," Skidoo defended himself. "The blame fool wouldn't have kept his money. Mittens Magruder gave Chance an option to buy the Peacock Mine—at a price that will take all Chance's original stake and the profits he'd have got from the gold brick. I made Mittens give me a split on the mine deal in return for my helping Chance clean up on those slickers. Figured I'd hand Chance back his two thousand and keep the rest of my share for my trouble. . . . But all right," he said, using shrewd psychology, "if you got to marry that noodle of a cowboy to be happy, I'll give him a job as foreman and make him a present of the money he lost."

"Chance wouldn't take the money," said Chloe. "And, anyway, I told you I have no intention of marrying Chance Adams or anyone else. The blamed nitwit."

Skidoo mentally patted himself on the back. "Of course not," he said. "A practical, smart girl like you couldn't be happy with a feller too dumb to come in outa the rain."



CHLOE sat on the veranda that night, waiting with a heavy heart for Chance, but he did not return until early the next afternoon, riding in to the ranch, whistling cheerfully.

"Poor Chance," said Chloe to herself. "He hasn't even found out he's been taken in. It'll be a blow to him when he realizes it. We'll have to make it up to him some way."

Chance waved to her and rode up to the veranda. "Why, you look as if you'd been crying, honey," he remarked. "What's wrong?"

"It's all right, Chance," she said. "We all make mistakes. It was really Dad's and my fault—allowing Hidalgo and that Indian to swindle you. We should have notified the sheriff."

His eyes opened in astonishment. "What's that?" he asked. "Who told you those birds swindled me? I knew they were trying to palm off a brass brick for a gold one by switching bricks. I let 'em switch, but me, I did a switch myself when I pretended to go down to look after my horse, sneaking around instead to climb through a window and make the change. I knew where they had the brick hid because my father got taken in by the same trick in the same place years ago. I took the brick into town and the jeweler melted it down last night and paid me for it at the regular rate for gold, taking out a small commission for his trouble in sending it to the mint."

"You did?" said Chloe, thunderstruck. "You mean you—you sold it—and it wasn't brass? And you have the money?"

"Yeah. Didn't want to waste time waiting to send that gold to the mint, for I've got another money-making deal to close today. I'm buying Mittens Magruder's Peacock Mine."

Chloe recovered herself. "I'm glad, Chance," she said, "that you were smart enough to put it over on Hidalgo and the Indian. But for Heaven's sake

don't spoil it now by turning your money over to Magruder for that white elephant. He salted the samples he gave you. You don't know anything about mines. You're a bronc-buster."

He grinned down at her. "Now look here," he said patronizingly, "don't you worry your head about my affairs. I'm going to make a lot of money with the Peacock and then buy a big ranch —for you and me."

Chloe shook her head. The poor simp. Jumping from one frying pan into another. "Listen to me, Chance," she begged. "You were lucky once. But you can't outslick Magruder; he's fooled expert mining engineers into believing they could work the Peacock. You've gone crazy with your plan to get money easy. And I'm warning you it will be all over between us if you go through with that Peacock deal."

"But, honey," he protested heatedly, "I tell you I know what I'm doing. You Burnetts seem to think you got a monopoly on the gray matter in this country. I'll show you and your conservative old shellback of a father."

Chloe's heart sank. Her threat had been made in the desperate hope that it would bring him to his senses. It hadn't. Chance, flushed with anger, lifted his hat and jogged away in the direction of Gold Canyon and the Peacock Mine to pay his money over to Mittens. Riding out of her life forever—she hoped.

She was cured forever. Calling her father a conservative old shellback! She hoped the stubborn swell-headed mule would lose every cent and have to break broncs for a living the rest of his life.

Ten minutes later a rider pounded along the road from town and pulled up at the corral to talk to the choreman. Hidalgo Herrick. The choreman waved in the direction Chance had taken a little while before. Then Hidalgo galloped away, following the same trail, and, as Chloe watched, she saw two other horsemen emerge from the brush to join Hidalgo, one of them the Indian. Following Chance who was carrying his money to pay for Mittens' mine.

Hidalgo must have discovered in town that Chance was taking out the money to buy the Peacock and, enraged at having sold their brick of real gold for a paltry two thousand dollars, the slickers were riding to hold up Chance and rob him. The dirty, double-crossing tinhorns! They were heavily armed, with belt guns and rifles in saddle scabbards, and without doubt they'd kill Chance if he resisted. And Chance would surely resist; he wouldn't give up that money just because the three had covered him with their guns.

There were no men on the ranch except the old choreman and the Chinese cook. Running into the house, Chloe snatched her carbine from the antler rack and a box of cartridges from the fireplace mantle. Then, racing to the corral, she grabbed the sorrel pony the old choreman had just saddled to wrangle horses.

Hidalgo's trio obviously would cut across the ridge above Gold Canyon to get ahead of Chance. She rode fast, spurring hard, leaving behind her a little cloud of dust, praying that she would be in time. Chance's danger had cleared her head of all the rubbish about practical things Skidoo had put into it. She didn't want to live unless Chance lived. She cared for him as she would never care for another man. The ability to make money had nothing to do with love; she loved Chance Adams and she would marry him if he didn't have a cent and never would have one.

When she drew up on the ridge above the brushy slopes of Gold Canyon, she saw Hidalgo and the two Mexicans, already on the bottom, sitting their horses behind a screen of brush along the trail, waiting, guns ready, to ambush Chance.

Chance, she saw suddenly, was jogging his horse unsuspectingly straight toward them, less than fifty yards

away. There was no time to lose; he had to be warned. The distance was too far for a shout to carry and too far, as well, for her carbine. But whipping out the carbine, she sent three shots down at the trio and spurred straight down the steep canyonside.

Astonished by the shots, not knowing what this attack from an unsuspecting quarter meant, Herrick and the other two foolishly broke cover and rode toward Chance.

Seeing them, Chance flung himself from his saddle and, with his mount as barricade, pitted his six-shooter against the guns of his three attackers. Chloe, plummeting recklessly down the brushy slope, caught glimpses of the battle, the pale flashes jetting from the exploding guns. More and more during those tense seconds she realized what a small thing money was—when you're young and in love.

Crashing through a final clump of brush to reach the canyon bottom, Chloe saw that the fight was over. The guns had stopped and Hidalgo Herrick was fleeing up canyon. The Indian was following, bent far over his saddle horn, plainly hit. The third of the group was lying under his fallen horse.

As Chloe raced by this man a fleeting glance revealed him lying outstretched, stone-still. Down the canyon Chance's horse was down also, still kicking a little, while behind the animal the bronc-twister was on his knees, dazed, one shirt sleeve bloody. Chloe dropped from her saddle and flinging herself by Chance's side, began a sudden wild weeping.

"NOW, HONEY," protested Chance, "there's nothing to cry about now. Those shots you sent down at those birds plumb spoiled their aim. The best they could do was put a bullet through my arm—which, at most, chipped a bone."

"But you might have been killed!" Chloe cried. "And the last thing I said to you before you rode away was that it was all over between us. I was just selfish, Chance; quarreling over what you did with money that was yours. I don't care if you throw away every cent on worthless mines. Only if you ever get held up again, I want you to promise to hand over the money without a fight."

She had lost her hat during her rapid ride and the hand of Chance's good arm went softly over her sleek hair. "I couldn't have given them this money, because I'm carrying it in a certified check. And I'm not throwing it away on a worthless mine. It isn't the Peacock I want; it's the big dump the suckers that Mittens hooked have been piling up all these years. It's rotten with sylvanite—an ore that up to a few years ago even the experts couldn't identify. Dad told me about it before he died, and I've had a lot of samples assayed.

"All I needed then was to get Mittens to sell it to me cheap, for my aunt's inheritance was only three hundred dollars and I'd saved up only seventeen hundred from wages and bronc trading. I let people think the inheritance was three thousand, knowing there'd be a bunch of slickers swarming around me, Mittens among 'em. Mittens tried to sell me some of his other properties but I insisted on the Peacock. Thinking he'd get it back again in no time, he made me a lot lower price than he ever made anyone else. But it was still more than I could raise, until Hidalgo helped out. There's enough ore in that Peacock dump to buy us a big cattle ranch; all it needs is the hauling away."

"It doesn't matter," said Chloe dreamily. "I'd marry you, Chance, if you had only a hundred dollars. My father and mother started housekeeping on less than that."

"I wonder what Skidoo will say?" remarked Chance just before he kissed Chloe.

ONE OF the things Skidoo had to say he stated as he and Mittens Magruder visited at the Peacock. Skidoo had just told Mittens that the deal was all off; that he had to lay off Skidoo. Mittens was very sad, while Skidoo was in high spirits.

"Yessir, I flatter myself I knew how to raise Chloe," he was boasting. "Trained her from a child knee-high to be practical. To realize that a impractical bird like Chance Adams is simply impossible as a husband."

Then Skidoo stared, struck speechless. The two people who were riding up the canyon were traveling with their horses much closer than the trail made necessary. One of Chance's arms was in a makeshift sling, but the other one was all right and was being put to a good use. A natural one. It was around Chloe's waist.

Skidoo swallowed, and then said feebly, "Look at that!" While Mittens Magruder, Chloe not being his daughter, only chortled. . . .

It was Mittens Magruder's turn to say something later, when big sixteen-mule wagons began to freight away the valuable ore from the dump of the mine Mittens had sold Chance Adams.

Watch for

Prairie Woman

A tender and haunting tale of faith

By Dabney Otis Collins

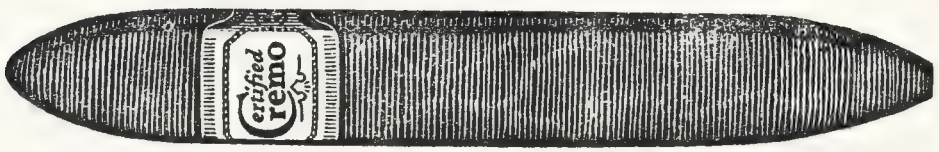
and

Hard Gold

A story of a bandit's terror trail

By Francis W. Hilton

In the Second December Number



You don't have to pay 5¢ for a fine long-filler cigar...

SMOKE Cremo NOW 3 FOR 10¢

New Deal for Kate

By James W. Routh

The evidence was plain—that drawling towhead was a rustler and the H Bar owner should've captured him. She couldn't—except with her own particular lasso.

KATE HILTON slid her pony down the steep bank to the bottom of the draw. Smoke from a small mesquite wood fire lifted behind the four cowboys and their prisoner. A roan gelding with a strange brand, anchored to a clump of greasewood, shifted nervously as she rode past.

"So this one didn't get away!" said Kate, pulling her pony to a stop.

Tex Lamont, lanky H Bar foreman, nodded. "We caught us a rustler, all right."

The prisoner was a tall young man, wide of shoulder and lean of flank, with a shock of yellow hair on his uncovered head. He didn't look like a cow thief, Kate thought, but the facts were too plain to be doubted. Even a confirmed crook could have clear blue eyes, a long straight nose, and a firm mouth that looked as if it could smile easily. She swung down and advanced toward him on foot.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded.

"He'll talk better with a rope around his neck," said Joe Salter.

H Bar had lost too much stock lately for anyone connected with the outfit to have any charitable feelings toward rustlers. Trying to catch up with the thieves had run the cowboys ragged.

The boss of the outlaw gang knew his stuff; this was the first bit of luck they'd had. Kate had her suspicions as to the source of the trouble, but proving it was something else. If this chap with the yellow hair could be made to talk. . . .

"That's an idea," she said to Joe Salter. And to the prisoner: "Well, you aren't a deaf mute, are you, Mister Cow Thief?"

His blue eyes met hers in a look that for some reason made her cheeks burn. And because of this, it made her angry. Her own eyes, brown and flecked with gold, took fire. She stiffened, standing in the full glare of the sun, tall, deep-bosomed, lovely in spite of her mannish attire of overalls, work shirt, and cowboy boots. The hot wind flattened the brim of her hat. Her lips tightened.

"No," said the man with the yellow hair in a quiet drawl. "But I ain't just shore what talkin' will do for me, ma'am."

"The evidence is plain enough, at that," Kate snapped.

"Seems like. Howsomever," his drawl became very deliberate, "all I'm admittin' is that my name is Jeff Dixon. And I've saw a heap of pretty gals in my life, but not one that was a marker to you! And if that's a hangin' offense on this range, I've shore got no defense!"

Kate swayed forward instantly, her clenched hand lifting to strike impertinence back into the mouth that uttered it so brazenly. Perhaps it was the fact that he neither flinched nor smiled that checked her. There was neither fear, mockery, nor insult in his steady look, but a certain warmth of admiration that seemed wholly sincere. A crimson tide rushed into her cheeks. She pulled her hand down.

"A rope necktie will shore humble this galoot's slick tongue," growled Joe Salter.

"And teach him his manners," added Shorty Hill.

Kate glanced at Tex Lamont. The lanky foreman was rubbing his chin thoughtfully. She knew without asking that he was in accord with the view expressed by the two cowboys. He'd often said that rustlers were the same as Injuns—the good ones were the dead ones. Kate knew that her own father on occasion had taken it into his hands to put a curb on the activities of cattle thieves. Now that Webb Hilton was gone, these men who had worked for him would expect his daughter to do as he would have done. But Kate could not hang a man.

"We'll let the law handle this," she said crisply. "Tex, you and Shorty take this rustler to the ranch and lock him up. We'll send word to Sheriff Jackson. He's surely one of Gunnie Flemming's rustlers."

Tex nodded without comment. Shorty grunted disgustedly, but let go of Jeff Dixon's left arm and started toward the roan horse that was anchored to the greasewood bush. Joe Salter, however, was not satisfied. He was a wiry, dark man, with restless black eyes and an uncertain temper. He hadn't worked for the H Bar more than a few months.

"The law'll turn him loose," he said. "Hangin' him—"

"Shut up, Joe," Tex cut in. "You got your orders."

"But I tell you——"

Right then something like a cyclone seemed to sweep the draw. Jeff Dixon jerked his right arm out of the argumentative Salter's grip, clipped the cowboy on the jaw with a left hook that sat him on his seat squarely in the low-burning fire. He spilled Tex into Bill Thompson and dumped the pair of them in a tangle of arms and legs. He charged straight at Shorty, who wheeled with a startled yelp and grabbed for his gun just as a hard fist slammed him in the face. Then the fast-moving man with the yellow hair hit the saddle on his roan gelding that seemed to launch instantly into full stride.

All this happened while Kate stood in stunned amazement. She reached for her holstered revolver as the roan

caught its stride. She swung down on the man, and she could have stopped him. But she didn't. A strange paralysis set a freezing hand on her.

The roan horse ripped into the brush at the north end of the draw. The yellow hair of the man was a flaunting banner in the hot wind. Kate saw Tex come up onto his feet, gun in hand, and her paralysis broke in a long leap. She crashed into the lanky foreman's shoulder, clawed the gun down even as it roared. And then she was on her knees, and the roan and the man it carried were gone.

"My gosh!" said Tex mildly.

Bill Thompson eased himself profanely off a stunted cactus. Shorty sat up, looking dazed, and lifted a hand to his bleeding lips. Joe Salter swayed to his feet, wheeled cursing toward his horse.

"I'll catch that——"

"No chance," said Tex flatly. "That roan can outrun any hoss we've got. Stay put, Joe!"

His glance touched Kate again. She got to her feet, dusted the knees of her overalls, picked up her hat. Tex stooped to recover and hand her the gun she'd dropped.

"Thanks," she said. And then, lifting her head to look at him, she added: "I couldn't let you kill that man, Tex."

"Shore not," he agreed.

But his thought was wholly apparent to her. Her father would have stopped the fleeing rustler. But Tex was completely loyal to her as he had been to Webb Hilton.

Riding home alone, she thought about this. Without Tex she would never have been able to carry on after her father's death. Her mother for years had harbored a strange resentment against the H Bar and all it stood for; a resentment which solidified at her husband's death into an immediate determination to sell out and move back to her girlhood home, in Virginia. And in the meantime Kate had had to take over full responsibility for running the ranch. Without Tex she would have been lost.

"And I let him down by letting that cow thief escape," she thought. "What got into me?"

She could find no answer to the question. Jeff Dixon—with his steady blue eyes and his yellow hair and his quiet drawl and impudence—had left with her a disturbing and a confusing impression.

WHEN SHE reached the ranch her mother, a small bird-like woman, who chirped and fluttered through life, was waiting with news to divert her.

"It's wonderful, darling, wonderful! Mr. Carstairs is the dearest man! I always thought so. . . . I might have married him, only your father— But he hasn't forgotten. A real gentleman of Virginia, Katherine, you'll see. I mean you'll marry someone like him, but of course that isn't— What I really mean. . . . Oh, it's so wonderful!"

"What is, mother?" Kate broke in gently.

Elizabeth Hilton took a deep breath and seemed suddenly to be tall and stately instead of small and rather drab. Kate loved her deeply and understood her very well indeed. Swept off her dainty feet by the impetuous wooing of the young Westerner, Webb Hilton, whom she had never understood and of whom she had always remained a bit in awe, this Virginia lady had never been at home in cattle-land.

Kate sometimes found it hard to believe that this could be her own mother. Her inheritance came so strongly from her father, who had loved life passionately and lived it fully.

"We're going home, Katherine," chirped Mrs. Hilton. "Home—to Virginia! I wrote to Robert—Mr. Carstairs—and he has found someone, not personally, of course, but through some attorneys at Fort Worth who will buy the H Bar ranch."

Kate knew that she was beaten. This was what she had dreaded. It was what, she suspected, her mother had planned to do long before her father's death.

"I didn't know you'd written to Mr. Carstairs, mother," she said.

"You were so busy, riding around, turning yourself into a rowdy. . . . I always dreamed of my daughter—a lady. No, I did not tell you. After all—"

"After all," Kate said quietly, "your mind was made up to sell. All right, dear. Let's go inside where I can read the wonderful Mr. Carstairs' wonderful letter."

The letter itself was direct enough. Carstairs' Fort Worth correspondents had advised him that they had interested a prospective buyer in the ranch, and that a personal inspection of the property would be made shortly.

"A beginning," Kate thought, "but not necessarily the end."

On the contrary her mother seemed to feel that the ranch already was sold. She fluttered and chirped excitedly, planning their departure and her own return to her girlhood home. Kate found it rather pathetic.

For herself, she was heartsick at the mere thought of selling out. Born in this very house, with the exception of a few years away at school, she had lived her whole twenty years on the ranch. She knew the country and its people; she loved it all. When she left she felt that she would leave behind some vital part of her.

"Which probably is the way mother has felt all these years about her old home," she told herself. "I mustn't be selfish."

MEANTIME, the ranch was still Kate's to manage, and in work there is relief from brooding. That evening she summoned Tex to the ranch office, and made plans for a round-up to collect two hundred prime three-year old beef steers for which she had a contract. This was more or less routine ranch business, but the rustlers had to be considered.

"Too bad that scamp got away today," said Tex, his eyes downcast upon the rolling of a cigarette. "Sheriff Jackson needs encouragement afore he'll talk turkey to Gunnie Flemming."

Kate drummed with her pencil on the table top. She knew what her foreman meant. She frowned and bit her lip. Opportunity had been in her hand, and a weakness she'd not suspected had caused her to let it slip. Was it an inheritance from her mother, this softness? She could see her father take charge of a similar situation. That young exponent of a running iron would have confessed all his past sins and present associations. And what the H Bar needed was some definite evidence to put in the hands of the sheriff.

"My fault," Kate said slowly. "But somehow I'm not sure it was a mistake to let him go, Tex."

Lamont looked at her, obviously perplexed. She smiled ruefully.

"I can't tell you what I mean," she confessed, uncomfortably aware of the warmth of her cheeks.

He drew the flame of a match into his cigarette, blew it out with exhaled smoke. The lines about his faded eyes deepened.

"We'll git along," he drawled. "I've heard that what a woman can't explain is plumb liable to be more important than what she's plumb shore about."

It was strange. As Tex spoke she seemed to look into a pair of clear blue eyes, to hear the soft drawl of another voice uttering an extravagant compliment, to see the swift lance-like movement of a lean young body, the flaunting of yellow hair in the hot wind. And all the blood in her body seemed to rush into her heart in that instant, and she knew panic. Wild and unreasoning panic! But her lips went tight and she lifted her chin.

"It was foolish," she said.

Tex lifted a shaggy eyebrow at her. *"Quien sabe?"* he murmured. Then,

looking at her straight, he said, "Joe Salter is plumb provoked. Says after he spotted that rustler, caught him nappin' and busted him over the head, you come along and turn the cuss loose. 'Tain't right, he says."

Kate took a deep breath. Sanity was restored. Her brown eyes widened and narrowed under Tex's look. She suppressed a shiver. Something ugly and unclean seemed to have crept into the room with them. Something born of the strange fact that the rustlers always appeared to know in advance just where H Bar stock was to be found or moved. Quietly Kate laid her pencil on the table.

"No!" she breathed. "Oh, no!"

Tex moved his bony shoulders, sighed. He got to his feet. At the door he glanced around at her.

"We'll start in the mornin', workin' south from the Poplar Tanks. *'Noches*, Kate."

"Goodnight, Tex."

For a long time after his footsteps had faded away into the evening stillness she sat there. The clock on the wall ticked loudly. She looked at it without seeing it. . . .

Presently the sound of a piano in the living-room stole through the house. Kate sat for another moment, smiling crookedly, listening to her mother's thin sweet voice: "Carry me back to ol' Virginy. . . ."

A lump lodged in the girl's throat. She stood up abruptly, blew out the lamp. A man's voice drifted in through the open window at the end of the room.

"That's better. It's plumb scandalous the way you folks burn oil at this ranch!"

Kate seemed to freeze up solidly. She heard the soft scrape of cloth on wood, the quiet thud of a booted foot.

"Doggone!" came the plaintive drawl. "Relax, Kate. It's only me, Jeff Dixon."

"Jeff Dixon! What are you doing here—you—cattle thief?"

She went around with a swish of her skirt. His lean frame was silhouetted against the moonlight that filled the window. He chuckled.

"Come to call on the prettiest gal—"

"Don't be a fool!" she cut in tensely. "If you're found here, it won't be funny! My boys will shoot you."

"Mebbe so," he acknowledged calmly. "But I've got to talk to you, Kate. Seein' as how you saved my life and all, I figgered," his voice lifted a trifle above her whispered protest, "there's a couple of points to get straight between us, ma'am."

"For a rustler," she told him, "you've got your nerve! I want nothing to do with you. Get out!"

"Aw, now, Kate!"

Suddenly he was right before her. She shrank back, filled with a kind of delicious terror against which she rebelled promptly and violently. She straightened with a jerk.

"That's better," he murmured. "Don't be afraid of me, Kate!"

"Afraid!" Her breath drew in sharply. "I'm not afraid of you. Neither am I likely to repeat the mistake I made this afternoon!"

"It's about this afternoon that I came here," he said. "Listen, Kate. I'm no rustler."

"You were caught branding an H Bar calf," she said coldly.

"Did you see the calf?" he asked. "There was a yearlin' steer tied down by the fire. Some gent had started to workin' over the H Bar brand. He must of heard me comin', though, because he vamosed before I caught sight of him. And that," he added grimly, "is where I made my mistake."

"It's always a mistake for a crook to get caught," Kate agreed. "What's the sense of all this?"

"I ain't shore," he drawled, and she seemed to see the gleam of his blue eyes in the darkness. "But I'm speakin' my piece anyhow. My mistake was in bein' careless, forgettin' I was a stranger liable to tie into trouble by bein' curious. I got down to look at that doctored brand. Likewise, I reckoned the critter had to be turned loose. And

right about then some gent I didn't see Injunned up and beaned me from behind. Which," he concluded, "is the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth. You've got to—"

"Katherine! Where are you, darling?"

Out in the hall Mrs. Hilton called. Kate went stiff with dismay. But not so the astonishing young man with the yellow hair.

"Oh! Oh!" he murmured. "Time to go! Kate—"

His hands found her, drew her forward. Instinctively she thrust against him. But he was strong, strong and irresistible. She felt the pounding of his heart against her breast, the roughness of his sleeve against her cheek. Firm fingers tilted her chin. Warm lips claimed her lips utterly. . . .

"Trust me, sweet! I'm playin' a queer game, but trust me!"

The murmured words came back to her from the window. A dark form vanished into the outer moonlit darkness. She stood alone in an empty room, shivering. And out in the hall her mother called again.

"Coming, Mother!"

HER next few days were busy ones. She spent most of them in the saddle. This was not necessary exactly, because Tex was entirely competent, but Kate followed the pattern set by her father in managing the ranch. Besides, restlessness drove her constantly.

Each day now might be the last. Each tomorrow might bring the man who would buy the H Bar. She had to pack into every hour as much as possible of the life she loved, as many fresh pictures as possible of the country. And she had to forget, too. She had to forget, if she could, the pressure of strong arms holding her, the thumping of a heart against her heart, the brief madness of a kiss.

During these days her mother was no help. Each contact between them brought a sharp reminder of impending loss. For there seemed to be no doubt whatever in Elizabeth Hilton's mind that the ranch was in reality already sold. As soon as the new owner arrived, they would leave. She fluttered and chirped from morning till night, as busy as a nesting sparrow and as happy.

"We must be ready, darling. Men don't like delays. Your father always was impatient, I remember. Kate, I do wish you'd think of your complexion; you're like an Indian. Now in Virginia a lady. . . ."

Kate tried to be patient, but she seemed to have lost her sense of humor. Everything irritated her. She even took Tex sharply to task for changing some unimportant detail of the work.

"Why don't you consult me?" she flared. "I'm still running the ranch even if that Gunnie Flemming rustler is draining it."

"Never heard nobody question it," he drawled.

Promptly ashamed, she reached out and laid her hand on his that rested on his saddle-horn.

"Forgive me, Tex!" I don't know what's got into me lately!"

"Forget it, Kate," he said gently. "A fella's got a right to be edgy sometimes, I reckon. Heard from the gent that's comin' to look us over?"

She shook her head. They jogged along behind a small bunch of cows. Other cattle were in motion over a considerable area as the circle drew into the focal point of the drive. Shorty Hill's shrill "Yip-yip-ee" lifted above the thudding of hoofs, the swish and crackle of brush.

"Mebbe when he does," Tex suggested, "the boys could give the cuss the razzle-dazzle and sort of discourage him from buying you out."

Kate laughed. "There'd only be another along later."

Thus that flare-up was forgotten, but there were others. Kate did not know what had got into her. Regardless of how tired she might be, the nights were

endless ordeals. She would lie rigid in her bed, her nerves like taut bowstrings, her thoughts whirling. Or she would twist and turn and thump her pillows, and find herself sobbing. It was all utterly silly.

"And if I ever catch sight of a smart aleck cow thief with yellow hair," she vowed viciously one night, "I'll shoot him!"

Sitting up in bed, arms locked around her knees, she was sure of it. She hated that cocksure rustler who called himself Jeff Dixon. That was what ailed her. She hated him as she'd never hated any living creature. And her hate was all mixed up with her dread of leaving the home she loved, her foreboding of a future lived in a strange country and among strange people.

But, flopping back to her pillows, she decided that if she could settle the habits of that glib talking gent with the blue eyes, maybe she could bear up under the rest!

Jeff Dixon, however, seemed to have dropped through the window that evening into oblivion. Only the memory of him and what he had done remained to torment her. Her hate fattened on that memory. She had not lived her twenty years without being kissed. In a country where women were scarce, a pretty girl had her pick of suitors. Kate had liked a few of hers rather well, had come near to marrying one. But no man had ever received so much concentrated thought as she bestowed upon this worthless scamp—as, in her more charitable moments, she dubbed him. And she felt sure he worked for Gunnie Flemming—famous Border rustler.

"He's probably off stealing someone else's cows," she reflected. "Or down below the Border kissing some half-breed *señorita!*"

She gritted her teeth with hating him and despising herself. But the days passed with no sign of him.

THE Fort Worth attorneys wrote again that their client would soon reach the H Bar. They suggested that arrangements be made to expedite his inspection of the property, but they neglected to mention his name or the exact date of his arrival.

Kate, however, made the necessary arrangements. The round-up was a pretty complete one, since the steers to be sold had to be carefully selected. All three-year-olds were thrown into a separate pasture where, when the gather was completed, they would be cut again to make up the herd for delivery. Now, to meet the convenience of the prospective buyer of the ranch, she gave orders to work all stock out into the open and hold it under loose herd.

"Gunnie Flemming ain't goin' to pass this bet," Tex prophesied. "We're shore makin' his rustlin' easy, Kate."

"There's no help for it," she said bitterly.

Late the afternoon of the second day following, in a deeply despondent mood, she rode toward the ranch alone. There was nothing right in her world. She dreaded to reach the house for fear the buyer would have arrived. The stock, out in the open, was a tempting bait for the rustlers. Her mother was packed, ready to leave immediately the ranch was sold. And Jeff Dixon. . . .

"I hope his *señorita* gives him the smallpox!" she thought viciously. . . .

The ranch buildings were in sight when a rider broke out of a brush-rimmed canyon westward. A fast-moving rider, who hunched forward in his saddle, spurring his horse that ran unsteadily as if about played out. With the sun behind them she could tell no more than this. But no one rode like that without good reason. She drew her revolver, tilted the brim of her hat to shade her eyes, scanned the brush behind the rider for signs of others in pursuit.

Then, when she looked again, he was much nearer and her breath went out between her teeth. For the horse was a roan gelding. She had seen it one other

day, anchored to a clump of greasewood near a branding fire!

"Jeff Dixon!"

Her hand gripped her drawn weapon. But she could only sit there rigidly, while the gap between them closed swiftly, and the roan's sobbing breaths became clearly audible. She saw Jeff's long-jawed face at last. It was streaked with blood and dust, haggard, grim. There was drying blood on his shirt. She cried out again.

"Jeff! Jeff, you're hurt!"

Then he was abreast of her, urging her horse to a run with the roan. His blue eyes blazed, his normally soft voice was curt.

"I'm all right. Ride! Kate, we've got to travel fast!"

Her pony jumped into stride. They swept along toward the ranch. And more words came from Jeff Dixon's lips like bullets, hard and fast.

"You're slated to lose your beef herd, Kate. Flemming's gang is goin' to fake a raid on the mixed bunch north of Poplar Tanks. That'll draw your boys up there. Then the rest of the gang will grab them young beeves—run 'em through Six Mile Canyon across the Border!"

They pulled up at the corrals in a skitter of dust and pebbles. Jeff was on his feet before his run-out roan lurched to a stop.

"How do you know so much?" Kate demanded. "Just what game are you playing this time? You can't fool me, you—"

Roughly he cut in. "Get some sense into your pretty head! Listen! Flemming knows every move you make with your stock. He's been tipped off that today's the day for his raid. One of your own crew tipped him! That cuss that was so anxious to string me up."

"Joe Salter!" gasped Kate, her mind beginning to click.

Jeff nodded, jerking at the latigo to loosen his saddle. "That's him. Mebbe you don't want to trust me, Kate, but you've got to! You must collect your crew—"

"How do you know so much?" she asked again, all her old suspicions of the man rushing over her afresh.

His blue eyes were stern and steady, blazing at her. "Told you I was playin' a queer game. I've been a member of Flemming's gang! I've been gettin' the lowdown on a heap of crookedness, Kate. But Salter spotted me today. I had to shoot my way clear—to warn you."

Chin up, slim and tall and lovely, her brown eyes searched his face. For a moment neither spoke. They just looked at each other in a way that stripped off all subterfuge, leveled all barriers. Kate's breast lifted sharply.

"You're an unpredictable man, Jeff Dixon!" she said. "But I'll trust you. We'll ride together!"

"Right!" he grunted.

Then he was jerking his saddle off the roan, getting his rope, opening the corral gate. With a quirk of her lips Kate began hastily to unsaddle her pony.

ON FRESH horses, they rode fast to collect her boys. Drab range rolled away beneath flying hoofs. The wind loosened Kate's hair. Her heart beat high with an excitement that did not come all from the possibility of a battle with the rustlers. She glanced at the man whose knee almost rubbed hers. His lean face, smudged with dust and blood and sweat, was grim. But when he sensed her look, his head turned and his quick smile flashed at her. And then, ahead of them, gunshots lifted suddenly in the distance.

To Kate this was proof of the truth of what he had told her. But to Jeff Dixon it obviously meant something else. He hauled his horse to a plunging stop.

"That's the fake raid! Kate, we'll have to split. Your boys won't trust me nohow, so I'll do you no good

yonder. You fetch 'em. I'll head for the beginnin' of Six Mile Canyon! Hustle!"

"But, Jeff—"

He wheeled his horse, cut her pony across the rump with his quirt. "Ride!" he yelled.

He was gone like a streak. Her own pony bolted. She could only settle herself to ride.

And ride she did, with fear spurring her more sharply than she spurred her pony. For she had no more doubt of Jeff, and she knew what he was going to attempt. Once the rustlers got the stolen herd into the long narrow canyon that led into the Badlands along the Border, the cattle would never be recovered. Pursuit, too, would be sheer folly, because the ambushed thieves could easily and quite safely wipe out the entire H Bar crew. But Jeff, single-handed, meant to beat the rustlers to the canyon and hold them out of it until she brought help!

"Run!" she panted into her pony's flattened ears. "Run! We'll be too late! They'll kill him! They'll kill him and then—Run! Run!"

The little horse did its best. But it seemed to her that no horse had ever run so slow, no distance had ever been so long. The shooting ahead continued, proof that a battle was in progress. And when at last she topped a long rise, she saw it.

There was a milling herd in the foreground, a thin line of cowboys between the cattle and a number of other riders who charged and fell back. Puffs of gunsmoke spurted. The boom of shots lifted above the bawling of the cattle. Cowboy yells added to the uproar. A riderless horse tore away into the brush. Kate spurred recklessly down the slope.

Where was Tex? She passed a huddled form, recognized the dead face of Shorty Hill turned toward the hot sky. Horror took hold of her. Her pony jumped a ditch, shied violently from a horse that was down with a bullet-shattered leg.

"Kate! Git out of this, gal, for Gawd's sake!"

There was Tex. A trickle of blood ran down his weathered cheek. His hat was gone. She grabbed the wrist of his gun hand as he charged up, gripped it hard and was almost hauled from her saddle.

"Tex! Get the boys together! This is a fake. The real raid is down below—our beef steers! We can stop them at Six Mile Canyon!"

He stared at her for a moment blankly. Then he caught it. He jerked away with a yell.

It seemed to require an endless time to get the crew together, but it really was not long. A solid volley further discouraged the already retreating rustlers. Then, with Kate and Tex in the lead, the H Bar crew wheeled and rode hell-bent for Six Mile Canyon.

A few brief words, snatched from her lips by the wind, gave Tex full information. They headed by a direct line for the mouth of the canyon, hoofs pounding a savage beat. And hardly had they strung out when they heard gunshots over there, flat with distance.

The fear Kate had felt before was nothing to what she now felt. She fed steel into her pony's ribs with every surging stride. Her hat went off, her dark hair rippled back. Because of her light weight, in spite of the fast ride she'd already given it, her horse began to draw away from the rest. Tex yelled, but she paid no heed. Her thought was all for the man who was staging a desperate fight to keep the rustlers out of the canyon. He was fighting her fight. He was her man. Her man!

It swept her like fire. No matter what he had been or done, no matter who he was or where he came from, Jeff was her man! She knew it now. His blue eyes, his yellow hair, his smile, his drawling voice. . . . "Oh, God!" she thought. "Don't let him be killed! Get us there in time! I love him so! I love him! That's all I want ever, just him. Please, God!"

Stampeding steers crashed through the brush. The boom and crash of gunshots was very near. Cursing horsemen,

spurring to head the stampeded beef herd, sighted the H Bar cowboys, yelled and began to shoot. Kate rode straight on. A hard-faced rider swung in front of her, his horse rearing, his gun blazing down at her. Then he was gone and she raced on, unchecked, with Tex again abreast of her.

They broke through the brush, pitched down a steep slope. Twin bluffs marked the canyon's entrance. The main body of the rustler gang was there. She saw the big form of Gunnie Flemming, unmistakable anywhere with his flaming red hair. Tex jumped his horse ahead of her. Bill Thompson rode up on her left. The carcass of a horse blocked the entrance of the canyon, with a dead steer half across it. Jeff had got there ahead of the drive! He'd stampeded the herd!

But Flemming and his evil crew were caught in the open now, in the very act of theft. Like cornered wolves they fought. The shooting rolled up like thunder. Wild yells, curses, the rumble of hoofs, blended in the din.

Kate was deaf to it all, and her mind seemed numb, stunned by horror. Sick fear was in her. Her pony stumbled and went down. She landed clear with a jolt that winded her. But only one thought was alive within her. Jeff—Jeff Dixon—where was he?

"Jeff!" she heard herself scream. "Where are you, Jeff?"

On her knees, partly stunned, she dragged her hand across her eyes. And then she saw him. Lean and tall, his yellow hair flirting in the hot wind, he ran toward her, stumbling as he ran.

"Kate! Kate, if them skunks has hurt you. . . . Kate!"

She lurched to her feet, still somehow clinging to her revolver. The ground swayed and trembled beneath her. The world was mad and horrible, and wonderful. And then suddenly only the horror remained. Two horsemen broke out of the dust and smoke and confusion. They rode down upon Jeff. One was a big man with flaming red hair, mounted on a huge black horse. The other rode an H Bar horse, and his face was dark and distorted by hate.

Kate saw all this and seemed utterly helpless. It happened too swiftly. The two men were right on top of Jeff before she noticed them. She saw Jeff turn and sway, saw him apparently go down beneath the hoofs of the rearing black horse. She saw Gunnie Flemming throw down a gun, fire. She saw Joe Salter—the crooked cowboy who had sold her out—haul his horse to its haunches.

The gun in Kate's hand jumped, but the roar of it was lost in the roar of other shots. She dodged out of the way of the black horse that bolted past her with an empty saddle.

Gunnie Flemming was down. Kate saw Joe Salter sway and topple backward from the H Bar horse. And then, somehow, she was on her knees, lifting a blood-stained head with a mop of yellow hair to her breast.

"Jeff! Jeff, you mustn't be dead! Jeff, I love you so!"

Blue eyes looked up at her, wide lips moved. But his whisper was too faint for her to hear, and his eyes closed again, and he sank heavily against her. She held him, moaning. She was still holding him when Tex came.

"Shot up plumb bad, but I reckon he ain't dead," said the lanky foreman. "And them rustlers is plumb docile, what's left of 'em."

THEY carried Jeff to the ranch, and he was still breathing when they put him in Kate's own bed. A cowboy on a fast horse cut the breeze to fetch the doctor out from Canyon. Mrs. Hilton fluttered and chirped, and then very surprisingly took competent charge of the growing hospital.

Hardly one of the crew had escaped without a wound. Even Kate had been hit twice by slicing bullets. But the doctor came promptly, and when Jeff recovered consciousness she was at the bedside.

"Where'd you get the idea I was goin' to die?" he asked her. "Shucks, I figger I'm just goin' to start livin' now! Did I ever tell you why I kissed you that night, Kate?"

"I've wondered," she told him. "Did you think I was—so cheap?"

"Not that, never that, sweet! Didn't you know? Why, I loved you the minute I set eye on you that first time!"

"My goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Hilton, at the door. "I never heard the like—A mere cowboy! Why, young man, I'll have you know—"

"I love him, too, Mother," murmured Kate. "And that makes it perfect!"

"Indeed, it does not!" protested her mother. "The ranch will be sold! Why doesn't that man come? I mean, we're going away and down in Virginia you'll meet—"

"Hold it, ma'am," Jeff drawled. "Reckon it's time we had an understandin'." He pulled Kate a little closer, smiled at her, looked sternly at her horrified mother. "You see, Mrs. Hilton, ma'am, the fella that's figgerin' to buy the H Bar has come. He's right here—me."

"You?" gasped Mrs. Hilton.

"Yes'm. And I've looked the proposition over careful, includin' rustlers and some—uh, features that's plumb attractive!" He grinned at Kate's rosy cheeks, held her fast. "There's only one thing," he concluded deliberately, "standin' between us and a deal right now!"

"And what," Kate asked softly," could that be?"

He lifted her hand to his lips. "The lady boss of this outfit must go with it—or stay with it," he murmured. "Because from now on, wherever she is I shorely aim to be! Kate, will you—"

She pulled her hand away and leaned to give him her lips instead. Her heart, of course, already belonged to him.

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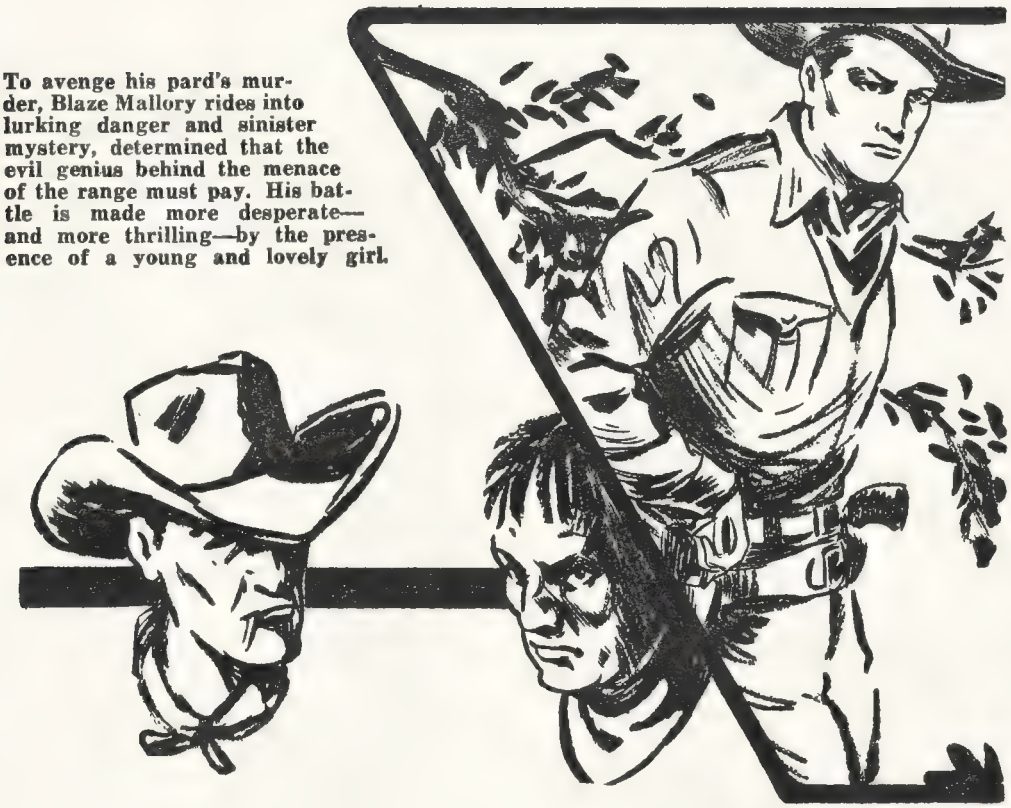

Outlaw Country

Part One

CHAPTER I

Rendezvous

TO ANYONE viewing it from a distance, the vega would have appeared almost as smooth and level as the surface of a billiard table. In reality, the immense green expanse dipped and rose in an endless series of undulating swells, looped by the yellow-white ribbon of the wagon trail, irregularly patterned with patches of a more vivid green where the shallow, sluggish creek wound its indolent way.

Above the confused tumble of broken hills massed against the heat-hazed horizon to the northwest of the willow brake, a higher peak thrust. Its steeply sloping sides, gashed and scarred by landslips, were almost bare of vegetation; the truncated cone that was its summit was worn and eroded by the elements until it presented the semblance of a crude Greek cross.

The rider on the handsome black gelding, cantering out from among the willows, observed the towering pinnacle with satisfaction. It was the Tepee, of course. Ahead of him, in a nearly straight line, was the mouth of

A Serial of

Rangeland Justice

By Amos Moore

Corkscrew Canyon, exactly as Joe had marked it on the map he'd sent. Indian Spring—you crossed a wooden bridge just before you got to it—was only about a mile and a half from the mouth of the canyon where it opened into the vega.

Journey's end! An end, too, to wondering what under the sun could be worrying Joe Chapman enough to induce him to write any kind of letter at all, much less one urging a busy man to travel the best part of five hundred miles, in order to help him make up his mind about something!

"There's some kind of dirty work going on. It's got me guessing so I can't get to sleep nights, but it's right up your chute, Blaze. I hate like sin to shove the buck to you; but if you could possibly spare the time to come down and help me out. . . ."

Blaze Mallory had spared the time; Joe had known he would. He hadn't spared himself, or Heels, the black. Indian Spring was the appointed meeting place, and half past eleven o'clock in the morning was the hour. It had only just turned eleven. With the vega left behind and only a little over a mile farther to go, Heels could take it easy and avoid the roughest spots in the canyon trail.

There were plenty of them and, Blaze thought, Corkscrew Canyon was aptly named. It turned and twisted in intricate convolutions. Its floor was now narrow and hummocky and ankle-deep in loose shale that had weathered from the rocky walls, now wide and level and thickly carpeted with dry grass.

In contrast to the almost unbroken silence that had brooded over the vega, Corkscrew Canyon was full of a multitude of small, secret noises that seemed to come from every direction at once, blending together into a single wave of sound that swelled and faded and

swelled again with its own throbbing echoes. Birds chirped and twittered in their hidden nests. Some little wild creature scrabbled and scratched behind a fallen tree trunk. A miniature avalanche of sand and pebbles skittered down from a ledge. A pair of green jays squawked with harsh monotony. Leaves rustled; water chuckled. The dry seed pods of some thorny bush scraped and rattled as if a strong wind were shaking them, though there was no wind blowing.

Small, secret noises that seemed to come from everywhere—and nowhere. The rhythmic hoofbeats of the black, cantering up the trail, were drawn in with them, made an almost indistinguishable note in their weird dissonance.

But there was one sound that was not absorbed and made a part of the whole: A sound dulled and distorted less by distance than by the twists and turns of the canyon itself. It was, unmistakably, the muffled report of a gun.

Blaze Mallory's lithe, broad-shouldered figure straightened alertly in the saddle. As if automatically, his hands dropped to the butts of the twin forty-fives that hung low on the front of his thighs, easing the weapons in their tied-down, flapless holsters. The clear, pleasant blue of his eyes clouded, hardened to a chilly, forbidding gray.

He spoke a word to his horse, and Heels was off like an arrow, running with a magnificent free stride, neck outstretched, nostrils flaring. He knew, as well as did his master, that something was wrong.

Ahead, the walls of the canyon converged sharply. A bare shoulder of rock humped obliquely half across the trail where it made a short U-shaped bend. Heels rounded the curve at top speed. Then, under abruptly tightened rein, with forefeet braced and haunches almost touching the ground, he slid to a halt just in time to avoid trampling a group of men who were stooping over some object lying on the grass at their feet.

So preoccupied were they that they had been wholly unaware of the approach of a rider. They scattered like autumn leaves before a boisterous gust of wind, their startled movement revealing the object of their interest to be a fourth man.

He was sprawled on his back, his body twisted, his limbs sticking out at grotesquely bent angles. He was hatless and coatless. His vest was unbuttoned, and on the breast of his shirt was a wet splotch of blood that had spread and widened until the whole front of the garment was dyed a bright scarlet. His eyes were open and staring, straight and fixed, upward at the sun.

Blaze Mallory had swung from the saddle before the black had finished its sliding stop. He gave but one quick glance at the motionless form lying in the trail, and then turned to the men before him. There was a steel-like glint in his chilly gray eyes. His clean-cut, tanned countenance was as devoid of expression as if it had been a mask sculptured from bronze.

To call them an unsavory lot would have been to flatter them grossly. One was a half-breed Mexican, greasy of hair, swarthy of skin, with tarnished silver hoops hanging from the lobes of his dirty ears and a gaudily striped sash tied about his waist. From hat to boots, everything he had on was spotted and besmeared with reminiscences of meals long past; and his clothing appeared less filthy than his person.

The second man was, probably, a native Texan, judging from his apparel. Coarse and dissipated-looking, he was of the type to be found lounging about the dives and bars of any tough cow-town; lazy and shiftless, drunk more often than he was sober; sullenly sure that the world owed him a living, and caring not in the least how he got it, so long as the getting never compelled him to do an honest day's work.

However, it was the third member of the trio who held Blaze Mallory's attention. The other two were undoubt-

edly genuine bad hats; but his was the dominating personality. About medium height, he was rather well built, if displaying a growing tendency to heaviness through the waist and hips. His clothes had cost money. They were a very riot of garish colors and flamboyantly new. But the two silver-mounted guns were not new. They had seen service, as had their stamped leather holsters; and they were worn in a manner to suggest that their owner carried them for use, not for show.

"Been havin' a bit of trouble here, huh?" Blaze Mallory inquired. His tone was entirely courteous. He did not look or sound at all dangerous. But those who knew him would have been warned by the broad exaggeration of his soft Southern drawl.

The man whom he addressed exhibited no perturbation. The flat-featured face above the checked red neckerchief was round and almost concave —like a dish, and as vacuous, save for the small, pale, wide-set green eyes.

"Why, no, stranger, we ain't been havin' no trouble," he said. "But this here feller we found looks like he'd had a-plenty. Somebody put a slug right smack through his pump."

"You know him?"

"Oh, sure. He's Joe Chapman, foreman of the Spur in a Circle. The Carson ranch."

"Have you any idea who done for him?"

For a moment, the man hesitated, as if he had half a mind to resent as mere impertinent curiosity these curt queries from a casual rider. Then he shrugged and shook his head.

"Nope. Not ary. Me and these two boys was driftin' easy-like towards town, and we heard a gun go off. But we didn't think nothin' of it till we come along and found Joe layin' here."

"That's all you know about it, then?"

The dish-faced man colored up angrily.

"Yeah, that's all we know. Now, mister, mebbe you won't mind tellin' me who the hell you are? And what business you got askin' me questions?"

"It's no matter who I am," Blaze Mallory said evenly. "But I don't mind tellin' you that I'm askin' you questions because I damn well want to. I'm only askin' you one more, though. Where are the hosses you three were ridin' when you come along on your way to town and found Joe Chapman here?"

It was a fact that, except for Heels, standing quietly in the long grass at the trailside a few yards away from his master, there was not a horse in sight!

The dish-faced man gaped and gulped, the red darkening in his fleshy round cheeks. He had no reply to make to this. It would, he now realized, have been better had he made none in the first place. He had certainly gained nothing by inventing and promptly being caught in a stupidly obvious lie.

"I'm waitin'," Blaze Mallory reminded him softly, "for your answer to that last question of mine. And just so's you'll understand I'm intendin' to have an answer, I'll tell you that Joe Chapman was a good friend of mine."

"Oh, so you're waitin', and he was, huh?" The pale little green eyes narrowed; the upper lip curled away in a snarl from the tobacco-stained teeth. "Well, then, just so's you'll understand, mister, I'll tell you that I don't give a—" And with extraordinary swiftness, the fellow's hand darted to his right holster, clawed for the butt of the gun there.

But as his fingers closed about it, there was a slash of flame from Blaze Mallory's hip, a deep, crashing roar.

Struck squarely in the center of his forehead, the dish-faced man toppled over backward with a bullet buried in his brain. As he fell, Blaze Mallory flung himself sidewise to the ground, firing upward through the swirl of blue-gray powdersmoke.

The Texan had dug for his weapon at the same instant as his leader, and he had had a split second more to get into action. But he had not counted

on his target's swift change of position. The slug from his gun whizzed harmlessly over Blaze Mallory's head and flattened itself against a rock by the canyon wall.

There was a scream of agony that ended in a strangled cough as the blood from a severed artery in his breast rose in his throat and poured from his lips. Another scream, high-pitched with terror, as the half-breed missed his last opportunity for murder and dropped in a twitching heap across the legs of his late confederates. His shot, ill aimed and hurried, had gone wide of its mark—and he had known that he was doomed before he died.

Quickly, Blaze Mallory got to his feet. He did not look at the men who had attacked him to make sure that they were dead. He knew they were. He was glad they were. His face betrayed no emotion whatever as he bent over the body of Joe Chapman; but his touch was as gentle as a woman's when he lifted the limp wrist, unfastened the blood-drenched shirt and turned it back from the round, dark wound over the heart.

There was no pulse. No faintest flutter of breath came between the parted lips where bubbles of red-flecked froth had dried. The wide, blank eyes that still stared upward at the noon-high sun were filmed over. Blaze hadn't had much hope to start with. Now he had none at all.

He stood up, methodically replacing with fresh cartridges the spent shells in his forty-five. He said, in a matter of fact tone, as if he were speaking to someone near at hand:

"Well, Joe, it looks like you put off sendin' for me just a bit too long. But I did the best I could for you, old-timer. The slate's wiped clean."

The best that he or anyone else could have done, though, wouldn't bring back a man who had gone out on the One-Way Trail. The friend whom Blaze Mallory had ridden nearly five hundred miles to meet, within a score of rods of this very spot, within fifteen minutes of this present minute, would never tell him why he had been summoned in the name of their old loyal comradeship.

Five hundred miles, over mountain and plain and desert, to keep a rendezvous—with death.

CHAPTER II

"Taking No Chances"

RETURNING his gun to its scabbard, Blaze Mallory stooped once more over the body of his friend to arrange it in a position of more decorous repose. He closed the sightless, staring eyes and began to straighten out the legs that were limp as the pulseless wrists were limp. . . .

But when Blaze moved the left leg, it flexed in a peculiar manner. It bent backward, the wrong way, and where there was no joint. With some little difficulty, he pulled off the well worn, dusty half-boot, and rolled the leg of the breeches up a few inches.

The shin bone was broken. It had snapped in two above the ankle, and the ends, pushing themselves out through the flesh, had made a long, jagged tear.

Blaze squatted back against his heels, frowning. Something odd about that injury! It didn't seem very probable that Joe could have got it merely by tumbling out of his saddle when he was shot. Though perhaps if his horse had bolted with him and he'd been thrown violently, so that all his weight came on his left leg when he was trying to save himself. . . .

But there was no blood at all in his boot, and none to speak of on the inside of his breeches leg. A man would lose a lot of blood from a bad compound fracture like that—assuming that he had been alive when he got it. The answer must be that Joe hadn't been alive when he got it. His heart had already ceased to beat before his leg was broken.

"Hmm. Queer!" Blaze Mallory said to himself, and went over to pick up the gun of the half-breed from among the stones and trampled grass where it had dropped. There were four cartridges in it and one empty shell. An examination of the gun belonging to the Texan yielded the same four-and-one result. So far, so good; they'd each fired one shot during the fight. Well, now for a look at that pair of silver-mounted forty-fives carried by the other fellow.

Blaze took them from their stamped leather holsters and spun the cylinders. There were five unexploded cartridges in each; a full load, except for the chamber where the hammer rested, customarily kept empty for the sake of safety.

Both of the weapons were well oiled and cared for. But when Blaze lifted each in turn to his nostrils and sniffed at it, he detected the smell of freshly burned powder about the right-hand one. And the delicate swirl of the rifling in the barrel was blurred and blackened.

Extracting the cartridges from the cylinder, he found the chamber that had been smudged by the discharge. It was as he had thought: This gun had been used very recently and reloaded without being cleaned. So the shot that had killed Joe Chapman had been fired by the dish-faced man. Justice, Blaze reflected grimly, hadn't been long in catching up with Joe's murderer!

But about that broken leg, now. Blaze wasn't satisfied that a fall from the back of a horse could have caused it. And, by the way, what had become of Joe's horse? It hadn't run down the canyon, so it must have headed the other way. Most likely, it had been scared and had high-tailed it for the home corral after the shooting of its rider.

Some thirty or forty yards from where Blaze stood, a thick layer of yellowish sand had washed into and nearly filled a shallow depression in the trail. There had been a heavy shower just before dawn that morning, and any tracks made previous to the time of the rain would have been obliterated by it. On the other hand, the comparatively smooth surface of the sand would have held the impressions of any that had been made afterward.

Blaze strode briskly to the edge of the sandy stretch, stopped and carefully studied the ground, his brows knit in renewed perplexity. Now, how was this?

There was a single set of boot tracks, leading toward him and made, as the length of the regular, evenly spaced strides indicated, by a man walking at a fairly rapid pace. A man who wore high-heeled riding boots, the left of which had a small patch on the sole near the toe. That single set of boot tracks only; no hoofmarks whatever. No rider, no horse, going in either direction through the canyon, had crossed that layer of sand since the rainstorm of the very early morning.

So Joe Chapman hadn't been shot out of his saddle or bucked out of it, for he hadn't been in the saddle when he was killed. He hadn't ridden to the place where his body lay; he'd walked there. Or, at least, he had walked over that wash of sand, because on the sole of his left boot was just such a small patch as was shown in that one-way set of tracks.

The thing didn't make sense. Any of it. Joe worried enough—and not about himself!—to write an urgent letter. Joe going on foot when he could just as well have ridden. Joe ambushed and shot down in broad daylight, only a few miles from his home ranch. Joe with a compound fracture of a leg that had no business to be broken at all. No; it just didn't make sense. But sense had to be made of it, just the same.

Blaze went on, skirting the edge of the sandy stretch, and crossed a wooden bridge. The structure, built of sturdy poles and logs with the bark still on them, spanned a deep fissure that cut the trail from one wall of the canyon to the other. A turbulent little stream

hissed and brawled among the water-worn boulders and jagged teeth of rock below, breaking into a smother of foam and splashing showers of fine, misty spray up almost to the handrail of the bridge.

A short distance farther on was another of the corkscrew turns that had earned the canyon its name; and, at the end of the turn, the opening of a small box canyon. By Joe Chapman's map, this was Indian Spring Canyon, the meeting place he had designated in his letter.

With the exception of a narrow pathway near the center, its mouth was choked with brush and a tangle of dense chaparral, with here and there a boulder green with moss and running vines, a clump of scrub oak, or a few straggly cottonwoods.

Blaze turned into the pathway and followed it until, through the dust-grayed leaves of the undergrowth, he had a glimpse of bright sunlight streaming down into an open space. He started to draw aside a low-growing branch.

"Put up your hands!"

The command came from behind him, crisp and clear. At the first syllable, he whirled with panther-like quickness, jerking one of his guns half out of its holster, only, in the middle of his turn, to release it and let it slip back into place. Slowly, he raised both his hands.

In the pathway, where she had silently stepped from the concealment of a boulder, stood a young girl with a thirty-eight leveled at him. A girl slim and trim in brown riding kit, her white shirt open at the throat, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

She wasn't pretty, in the ordinary sense of the word; but any pink-and-white wax-doll beauty would have looked washed-out and anaemic by comparison with her glowing, radiant vitality. Her smooth skin was tanned to a warm, rich ivory; her brown eyes, shaded by long curling dark lashes, had tawny golden lights in them. Her lips were red, with the vivid, arresting redness of a child's lips.

She was small—the top of her proud little head would scarcely have reached to Blaze Mallory's shoulder—but she was beautifully made. And she held herself with a poise and dignity that made her appear taller, more mature than she actually was. She said with quiet composure:

"It's lucky for you, my friend, that you think quickly. If the muzzle of your gun had cleared leather, I'd have shot you dead."

She meant it; no doubt about that. Her eyes, the firm, competent hand that held the thirty-eight, were as steady as the rock at her elbow. Somehow, she made Blaze Mallory think of a keen, clear flame.

"Yes, ma'am; I reckon you would. Mebbe we're both lucky, though. This is the first time I've ever put my hands up for anybody, but I guess there's got to be a first time for everything. Still, if I hadn't got the difference between your voice and a man's, you might've been hurt before I cashed in my chips. No offense, ma'am, but next time you tell a feller to stick 'em up, you want to be ready to let him have it before he can get to his gun."

If the girl were at all impressed by the implication that he could have shot her had he chosen, she did not show it. Her expression did not change, nor did the thirty-eight covering him waver by so much as the fraction of an inch.

"Never mind about instructing me in hold-up technique," she returned curtly. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. Now, sir, who are you, and who are those men you killed?"

"Before I answer you, ma'am, will you please tell me if you're Miss Gay Carson, of the Spur in a Circle ranch?"

The girl inclined her head. "Yes. I am Miss Carson."

"I thought so, but I wanted to know for sure," Blaze said. "Miss Carson, it wouldn't be much use for me to tell you my name. I could claim to be 'most anybody, and how would you know

what to believe? But I've got a letter in my pocket that'll clear it all up. Do you mind if I reach for it?"

"I do! You keep your hands right where they are!" the girl told him sharply. "Any other reaching that's necessary, I'll attend to myself. I'm taking no chances with you, sir!" She came toward him, cool and confident, advancing until the thirty-eight was within an inch of his stomach. "No chances with you at all. Which pocket is that letter in?"

The words were not out of her mouth before, with almost incredible swiftness, Blaze Mallory's left hand stabbed down and across to her gun, closing over the cylinder in a grip that was like the jaws of a steel vise. Simultaneously, he pivoted in a half-circle to the right, so that the menacing muzzle, clamped immovable in its original position, pointed across the front of his body, instead of directly at him.

The cartridge under the firing pin exploded, and the powder flash scorched the slack of his flannel shirt. His right arm whipped about the girl's shoulders and held her tightly pressed against his side—held her with no more apparent effort than if she had been a baby.

Never in all her life had Gay Carson experienced a feeling of such utter helplessness. Her feet were barely touching the ground. Her head was thrown back as, pale and rigid with fear, she gazed up into the inscrutable gray eyes so close to her own. Even as she looked, those eyes subtly altered in color, warming from cold gray to a clear and steady blue. They were fine eyes; honest eyes.

"Miss Gay, you were all wrong when you said you were takin' no chances. You hadn't ought to be so reckless." The voice was gentle. So, the girl realized, in spite of her terror and bewilderment, was the pressure of the arm about her shoulders. There was no brutality in it, only a firm and unyielding strength.

"Don't you see how easy it would be to get yourself into a bad jam, pokin' your gun against a feller's ribs thataway?" Blaze went on earnestly.

"L-let me go!" the girl gasped.

"No. Not until you give me that gun. Then I will. Please give it to me. I don't want to twist it away from you and hurt your hand. You can't fire it again. I'm holdin' the cylinder so's it won't turn and let the hammer back. Even if you could shoot it off, the bullet'd only put another hole in the air. We could stand here for a week, and you couldn't do any harm to me. Please, Miss Gay; give me the gun, like I asked you."

CHAPTER III

An Understanding

GAY CARSON could do nothing but obey. A wrenched wrist was the least she could expect if she refused or resisted. Reluctantly, she let go of the thirty-eight.

Blaze promptly released her, and stepped back with a courteous bow.

"Thank you, Miss Gay. Just a minute, now; we'll begin again." He drew first one and then the other of his big, black-butted forty-fives and placed them on the ground. Then, to the girl's amazement, he held out her own gun to her.

"You're giving it back to me?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please stand over by that cottonwood. I'll stay here. You see," his sudden smile lighted up his face with a singular charm, "you see, Miss Gay, if I'm goin' to convince you that I'm not a crook, I can do it a lot sooner and better if your mind's on what I'm sayin', instead of what I'm mebbe goin' to do."

Gay, too astonished to speak, retreated several paces.

"That's fine," Blaze said. "Now you've got me right. You can plug me like I was a tin can on a corral post if

I make a move in your direction, or go after my hardware. To begin with, I'll answer that question you asked me a while ago. My name's Mallory; Blaze Mallory."

"Blaze Mallory?" exclaimed Gay incredulously.

"You've heard the name before, then?"

"Of course, I have! Who hasn't? And my foreman has spoken of you—I mean of Blaze Mallory—any number of times. But you said yourself you could claim to be anybody!"

"And so I could, Miss Gay. But just s'pose you try to think of all the things your foreman's told you about this Mallory; what he looks like, how he dresses and talks, and all. Then check 'em. Take your time. I want you to see whether I fill the bill of particulars. I want you to be sure, Miss Gay."

It would be contrary to fact to say that Gay Carson was not nervous. She had had a unique and alarming experience, and she was more shaken than she would have been willing to admit or, indeed, was actually aware. But she was not too nervous to subject the young man in the pathway before her to a keen, comprehensive appraisal.

"Brown hair; blue eyes; straight nose. Looks younger than he is. Dresses mostly in gray, with a flannel shirt—for coolness—and a dark-colored neckerchief. Very fussy about his boots. Carries two guns and packs 'em low. No triggers on 'em. . . . Yes, I admit you answer the general description Joe, my foreman, gave me. In appearance and actions, too.

"Of course, you understand I haven't seen all the other gunmen along the Border," with a slight ironic stress on the word "other," "but I did see you a few minutes ago, standing over those bodies in the trail below the bridge. Who—"

"Miss Gay, I don't reckon your foreman told you his old friend Mallory was a gunman," Blaze corrected soberly. "He would have said gunfighter, which is a long ways from bein' the same thing. But we don't have to go into that now. Would you mind tellin' me just exactly what you did see when you first came along? It's kind of important."

"Important for you? Or for me?"

"For both of us, if I'm not mistaken. You heard shots?"

"I heard one shot," Gay corrected in her turn. "That was when I was some distance up the canyon. Then, when I got to the turn above the bridge, I heard five more, all bunched together. I jumped off my horse and looked out from behind a rock."

"And you saw—"

"I saw you standing at the edge of the trail. Your gun was still smoking. You leaned over one of the men. Then you stood up, reloaded your gun, and knelt down again beside the same man. You moved him—or his body. I thought you meant to rob him. But if you took anything, you didn't put it in your own pocket. After that, you walked around and examined three or four guns; I think it was four. Then you came on up here. Now, if that's what you wanted to know, who are—"

"Just one thing more, please, Miss Gay. About your thinkin' I was meanin' to rob that man I moved. If I had robbed him, say, of a paper, would you have been able to see it?"

"Certainly. I said that if you took anything—"

"All right, then. Just so's you're sure of that, you know I didn't steal that letter I mentioned from him or any of the others. Here it is." From an inside pocket of his vest, Blaze took an envelope, folded it into a stiff square, and deftly scaled it to Gay Carson's feet. "Read it, please. Mebbe what it says'll help you decide whether I'm to be trusted or not."

"You don't really expect me to trust you?"

"I hope you will, ma'am. I'm trustin' you—plenty!" There was a quizzical gleam in Blaze Mallory's eyes. "A feller has to have a lot of confidence in any woman to let her keep a gun trained

on him. No offense, Miss Gay, but would you point it just a mite to one side, please?"

Gay Carson stared at him in troubled uncertainty. Then, with a gesture of determination, she slapped her thirty-eight into its holster.

"I reckon you win!" she said, and picked up the envelope. She glanced at the postmark and address, and drew out the single sheet of cheap ruled paper it contained.

Blaze watched her admiringly. She was more than a mere person, this little Miss Gay Carson; she was a personality! No wonder poor old Joe had been enthusiastic about her in his letters to Blaze.

Twice she read through the penciled scrawl before she refolded the sheet, put it back in the envelope, and stepped forward with cordially outstretched hand.

"That clinches it, Mr. Mallory! I won't insult your intelligence by apologizing for the way I greeted you. But what do you suppose has happened to Joe? Why didn't he come to meet you here at the Spring, as he wrote he would?"

Blaze Mallory took her hand and held it in both his own. He said, very gravely:

"Joe did come to meet me, Miss Gay. But—I hate to have to tell you—he wasn't alive when I got to him. He'd been shot through the heart. That was why I had to prove to you that I'm Blaze Mallory, and that he'd written askin' me to be here this mornin'. Because he couldn't tell you about it himself."

"Joe—dead? Shot through the heart?" Horror and dismay were in the girl's voice. "But—but why? Who did it?"

"I don't know why—not yet, ma'am. But I will!"

"You didn't see the fight?"

"There wasn't a fight. Three ugly lookin' customers was standin' over Joe's body when I rode up the trail. I'd heard a sixgun go off—that same single shot you heard first—and I had a kind of hunch, somehow, that somethin' was wrong. I pushed my hoss and I got to 'em before they knew anybody was around. I asked 'em a couple of questions about how Joe come to get a slug through him, and they started tellin' me fool lies. When I let 'em understand that I wasn't fool enough to believe 'em, they tried to give me the same dose they gave Joe. I beat 'em to it."

"You—you killed them? All three?"

"Yes, ma'am. All three. I'd have got 'em if they'd been twice as many. I was mighty fond of Joe." In the quiet brevity of that statement there was no boastfulness; it was a simple statement of fact.

"But it just doesn't seem possible, a crime like this!" faltered the girl. "I wouldn't have believed that Joe had an enemy in the world."

"Nor I, Miss Gay. But I knew the minute I got his letter that somethin' had been worryin' him more'n he wanted to let on. And whatever it was, he figured it was too tricky for him to handle by himself, or he'd never have asked me to come on and advise him. I wish he'd dropped me a hint what it was all about. But he only says that there was some kind of dirty work goin' on; and that it had got him 'guessin' so he couldn't get to sleep nights.' I don't s'pose you have any idea what he might've had on his mind?"

Gay Carson shook her head.

"Not the slightest. Of course, I'd noticed that he was pretty glum, and he'd been keeping a good deal to himself. But none of us—"

"Has the business of your ranch been goin' all right?"

"Oh, Joe couldn't have been worrying about the ranch, because it's in excellent shape. This has been one of the best years we've ever had. What I started to say was that none of us at the Spur has been very cheerful these past few weeks. You see, we lost my father less than two months ago. Joe

was devoted to him; he took it awfully hard.

"So if I thought very much about his being moody and unlike himself, I set it down to his grief over Dad's death. Since Joe's been with us, he's been more like a friend of the family than an employee. We all thought the world of him. And—and now—this."

Tears came into Gay Carson's tawny brown eyes. She brushed them resolutely away.

"My crying about it won't do any good, I reckon," she said, forcing a wan smile. "It's too late now for anything to do any good."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, Miss Gay." Blaze retrieved his sixguns and slid them into place. "There's somethin' mighty mysterious about this business. I want to get to the bottom of it. And I'd like to find out everything I can before the sheriff takes charge. He mightn't care about my nosin' around; I've known sheriffs to be thataway. First off, I'd like to see if Joe's hoss is in there by the spring. That's what I came up here to look for."

"Mine is, anyway," said Gay. "I drove him into the clearing when you started across the bridge. I thought you'd keep right on up the main canyon, so I hid in the brush behind a rock. Then, when you turned into the path and walked past me, I didn't quite know what to do."

"Well, it seems to me you done pretty well, considerin', Miss Gay. Cool as you please, and not the least bit scared."

"Indeed, I was scared, half out of my wits! I knew you were bound to see my horse, and then you'd look for me. And you were bound to find me, too. I decided my only chance was to hold you up, get the drop on you while your back was turned."

"Well, next time—if there ever is a next time—you'll remember what I told you to do, won't you?" Blaze pulled aside the dusty branches that stretched across the end of the pathway. "When you're dealin' with a bad hat, shoot him first and ask him questions afterward. You're more likely to hear the answers, if there's any made."

"I'll remember," Gay promised, adding, with a shaky little laugh, "Next time, I won't be so sure I can take care of myself. But I reckon you and I both ought to be glad I hadn't learned that lesson this morning!"

They stepped out into a semicircular open space where the sunlight, pouring down through the treetops, mottled the lush green grass with a shifting pattern of black and gold. A saddled horse was grazing contentedly near a little spring that bubbled up into a pebbly basin, fringed with lacy-leaved willows. Close by was another horse, its reins knotted together and looped over a bough.

"They're both here, Blaze. That's Joe's, tied to the branch. And, see, he's loosened the cinch."

"Yeah. He was aimin' to have quite a long talk with me here, I wouldn't wonder." Blaze walked over to the willows and stroked the neck of the tethered horse. It nickered softly at his touch and rubbed its velvet muzzle against his arm. "Was Joe in the habit of packin' a rifle around with him regular, Miss Gay?" he inquired. "Around the ranch, I mean?"

"Not regularly, no. He'd have no use for it, and it would only be in his way."

"That's what I thought. But here's his Winchester in the saddle scabbard. He wouldn't load that much extra weight on his cayuse on the off chance of pottin' a coyote or whatever in the middle of the mornin'. And he wouldn't've left it here if he was afraid he might meet up with trouble along down the canyon. So I reckon we can take it that he wasn't lookin' to run across any trouble. Now what the deuce is this?"

It was a small, oblong packet, neatly done up in a square of buckskin and secured to the saddle by a doubled leather thong. Blaze unfastened it and carefully folded back the buckskin flaps. Under them, wrapped in a sheet

of soft white paper, was a thin, flat, bleached bone, slightly curved at one end and pierced by a smooth round hole about the size of a lead pencil. From the edges of the hole, a sunburst of tiny, irregular cracks radiated.

"What is it?" Gay asked, coming to Blaze's side. "A piece of bone?"

"Not a piece of bone; a whole bone," he replied, and frowned over it. "The shoulder bone of some kind of varmint, looks like. Might be a coyote's. And that there's a bullet hole, probably made by the shot that killed the varmint. You put a slug through a bone as dry as this one is now, and you'd smash it to smithereens, not just crack it. Rifle bullet, this was. About a thirty-thirty. The hole's too small to've been made with a gun of any larger caliber."

"But why under the sun should Joe Chapman have been treasuring an old dried bone? What do you suppose he was going to do with it, Blaze?"

"Well, I reckon I can guess what he was goin' to do with it." Blaze replaced the bone in its wrappings with the same care he had used in taking it out. "He was goin' to show it to me. And he must've figured it amounted to somethin', else he wouldn't 've been so particular about the way he tied it up. Joe most generally had a pretty good reason for what he did."

He started to put the package in his pocket, then, apparently thinking better of it, tucked it into one of Gay Carson's saddle bags.

"We don't want it to get broken, Miss Gay. And just for the present, I'd as soon nobody but you and me knew about it. That all right with you?"

"Anything you think ought to be done is all right with me," she assured him. "But—"

"If Joe fetched that bone along with him, when he was expectin' to meet me this mornin', it was because he thought I'd be interested in it. But please don't you ask me why he thought so, Miss Gay, 'cause I don't know, no more'n a rabbit."

"No. But, Blaze, look here! Is there anything you haven't told me?"

"Ma'am?"

"Anything, I mean, but what I read in that letter of his to you? You don't, for instance, know why Joe didn't ask you to come straight to the Spur in a Circle—his home—instead of arranging to meet you secretly here at Indian Spring?"

Blaze shook his head.

"No, Miss Gay, I don't. Unless—and this is just a guess, mind you—there was somebody there he didn't want me to see until after he'd talked to me. Or somebody he didn't want to see me. Anyway, he must have had a good reason for wantin' to keep our meetin' secret. And so long as he did, let's you and me keep it that way, like the bone, until we've begun to find out the answers."

"But I can't imagine who it could be, Blaze. We've only a few punchers, and they're honest and loyal. I can't—"

Blaze held up his hand. "Wait a minute!" he said. "There's somebody ridin' down the canyon, hear 'em?"

CHAPTER IV

The Rimrock

HOOFBEATS rang on the shale of the canyon floor, clattered over the wooden bridge.

"Somebody from the ranch!" cried Gay, and sped back along the path, with Blaze close at her heels. "Wait till I see who it is."

From behind the rock that had sheltered her before, she peered cautiously down the trail, then turned to beckon.

"It's all right. Come on!" she called, and hurried after the riders who had already pulled up and dismounted.

In following her, Blaze Mallory did not hurry. He wanted to give her time to make the preliminary explanations to them, and also to size them up for himself, more or less at leisure before

they were pigeon-holed by introductions.

As he approached, a fine-looking man of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty stepped toward him with outstretched hand.

"My sister's husband, Alec Webster, Blaze," Gay said. "And this is Ward Sterling, our guest and friend from the East."

"Mighty glad to meet you, Mallory, mighty glad." Alec Webster wrung Blaze's hand and held it while he talked. "But I'd have given 'most anything I've got, if it hadn't been this way. Joe Chapman was a man we couldn't spare; there's too few of his kind anywheres for 'em to be thinned out."

The big, strapping rancher was deeply moved and not, evidently, ashamed that Blaze Mallory should know that he was. There was a huskiness in his deep voice, and Blaze distinctly felt the tremor in his fingers as, with a final pressure, he withdrew them and ran them through his leonine mane of curling blond hair. He said:

"Gay's told us what you run into here. I s'pose there ain't no doubt that them three slick-ears bushwhacked poor Joe?"

"No, there ain't no doubt about it a-tall," Blaze agreed. He shook hands with the Easterner, Ward Sterling, who seemed to be an uncommonly likeable young fellow; and then, in a few words, related the story of his encounter with the gunmen. "I was hopin' that some of you folks at the Spur would be able to pin a label onto 'em, or some of 'em," he finished. "Don't they belong in this neighborhood, Mr. Webster?"

"I wouldn't want to say they did. They ain't from the Spur in a Circle, that's sure. Nor they ain't from the A Bar W—that's my own place. And there ain't another ranch for pretty near forty miles. This part of the country's real quiet and peaceable, Mallory. Why, even in Blue Chip, they don't pull off a shootin' scrap more'n once or twice a year, and then generally there ain't a whole lot of damage done. Now, these here beauties look to me like they'd—"

"Why, Alec, surely you recognize this one, don't you?" Ward Sterling interrupted, indicating the dish-faced man who had precipitated the fight with Blaze. "I do, anyway. Joe himself pointed him out to me one day when we were in town—said he was a tough customer." He turned to Blaze. "The fellow went by the name of Chink Tanner, and hung out with that bunch in Amity."

"Amity?" Blaze repeated.

"It's a ghost town in the barrens. It's been deserted ever since the mines closed down, a good many years ago. Recently, I couldn't say exactly when, but maybe two or three months, a hard-looking bunch moved in and camped there. Tanner belonged to it."

Alec Webster laughed, somewhat constrainedly.

"That's sure one on me, Mallory," he said, "havin' a dude from the effete East beatin' the memory of the old-timers! Now Ward mentions it, I reckon he's right; the jasper is Chink Tanner. Joe done considerable growlin' about the bunch bein' in the neighborhood; he was all for havin' 'em run out. But they wasn't doin' no harm, and I couldn't see gettin' lathered up about 'em. Now—well, it might be that Tanner had it in for Joe."

"Not likely," Ward Sterling said. "Joe knew him only by reputation, and I don't believe he ever spoke to him in his life. If Tanner—or anybody else, for that matter—had had it in for Joe, I'm positive he'd have said something about it to me."

"A railroad train doesn't necessarily have it in for a cow critter, to run over it if it gets on the track, Ward," Blaze remarked. "And it was Tanner, if you've got his name right, who did for Joe. I had a squint at his hardware. Him and his pals must've been hid out behind a rock or bush, else he wouldn't 've had things all his own way."

"Well, he didn't have 'em all his own way when he tried matchin' shots with you!" Alec Webster said, with an admiring glance. "Of course, he didn't know who he was up against. Now Joe, his bark was worse than his bite; half the time, he wasn't heeled. But he had a way of sayin' what he thought, regardless, and he could easy have tromped on Tanner's toes, one time or another, him thinkin' that bunch hadn't no right to be campin' down in Amity. And if Tanner had the ugly temper the stories about him credited him with, you couldn't even put bushwhackin' past him.

"Joe Chapman had made a kind o' pet of young Ward here, Mallory," the rancher went on, with an affably condescending smile at the Easterner. "Took a shine to him when he first came to the Spur and made a regular buddy of him. Still, I don't reckon he told him every time he blew his nose, or how many drinks he had when he went to Blue Chip alone. Joe and this Tanner could easy have got into an argument over a bar in town and finished it here. Pete, you heard anything about Joe quarrelin' with any of that Amity bunch?"

Pete Bixby, a sour-faced, stoop-shouldered puncher, who had been standing a little apart from the others, shook his head without even looking around when his employer addressed him.

"Naw," he mumbled, and spat out a stream of tobacco juice. "He didn't know none of 'em, 'cept Tanner."

"Well, I'll gamble 'twas a private row between them two," declared Webster. "What say we mosy along and send word to the sheriff, huh? We can't do nothin' for poor old Joe now." He sighed. "One of the finest, Joe was. But he's gone and I don't reckon we'll ever know exactly why he was killed."

"Mebbe not, Mr. Webster. But, like I was sayin' to Miss Gay, there's somethin' mighty mysterious about it. That bullet in his heart ain't the only hurt he got. His leg's broken below the knee, about as bad a break as I ever saw."

"That so? But there's nothin' mysterious about a man gettin' his leg busted when he's shot off his hoss."

"No. But Joe wasn't on his hoss when he was shot. And, if he had been, just fallin' outa the saddle wouldn't 've been enough to snap that big bone and drive it out three-four inches through the skin. 'Twould take an awful tumble to—" Blaze checked himself abruptly, slapped the palms of his hands smartly together. "Hell's jubilee! What a thick-headed idiot I've been! Joe wasn't down here on the trail when Tanner plugged him; he was up on the rimrock. A fifty-foot drop'd do what a fall from a hoss wouldn't. Here I've been puzzlin' my brains over somethin' that's as plain as the sun in the sky. I'm goin' up and give that place the once-over right now!"

He stepped out onto the grass, upraised eyes scanning the rocky wall of the canyon for a negotiable path that he could follow to the rim.

"No, you don't, mister!" Directly in front of him jumped the puncher, Pete Bixby, squaring off truculently. "No, you don't!" The man's eyes were blinking with a peculiar, animal-like excitement; the pupils were widely dilated. "There's four dead men here, and, 'cept for your say-so, we don't know how they got that way! We don't know you're Blaze Mallory! We don't know nothin' you ain't told us! You ain't sneakin' off nowheres; you're stayin' right here in sight! *Sabe?*" Bixby's hand was on the butt of his gun, his body in a tense, half-crouch.

Blaze Mallory exhibited neither surprise nor alarm at the sudden and wholly unexpected challenge.

"Now listen, Bixby," he said evenly, "it's mebbe natural for you to be suspicious, you not knowin' me personal. But I never did take kindly to threats. You got any questions to ask me, ask 'em like a white man and I'll answer 'em like one. But take your hand away from your gun!"

"Like hell, I will! If you're on the level, what've you got to worry about? My hand's stayin' right where it is. And if I see you make one funny move, it'll be just—"

The sentence ended in a yelp of pain. Pete Bixby had seen no move, funny or otherwise, because it was made too swiftly for his eye to follow. But Blaze Mallory's left-hand gun had flashed out and the heavy barrel, whipping down with merciless force, had snapped the bones in the puncher's forearm as if they had been but dried sticks.

With his other hand, Blaze deftly disarmed the man and hurled his weapon into a thorny bush. Then he holstered his own Colt and rounded on Alec Webster and Ward Sterling, his face grim and set.

"Well, what about it, you two?" he demanded harshly. "Do I fool around here the rest of the day, provin' that I'm Blaze Mallory and not a dirty bushwhacker? Are you doubtin' it, too? Either of you?"

There was the merest clock-tick of hesitation. Then:

"Of course not!" Alec Webster cried vehemently. "If there was any provin' to be done, the way you went into action just now'd satisfy me! But I knew you was Mallory, never did have no other notion. As for you, you damned jackass," he glared furiously at his puncher, Bixby, who was clutching his injured arm, his face working with pain, "who told you to speak outa turn? You think you're the boss, huh? Or mebbe that I ain't got sense or nerve enough to buy chips if it's necessary?"

"Well, but—"

"Shut your mouth!" roared Alec. "Tryin' to argue with me! You're through, Bixby! Fired, understand? Now! I won't have no such dumb leather-head drawin' down my pay on the A Bar W! You pick up your duffel at the Spur and go get your time from Buck. And don't you let me see you anywheres around my A Bar W when I get home, or I'll give you somethin' more'n just a slap on the wrist to cry over! Git!"

Pete Bixby started to speak again, took one look at the rancher's flushed and angry face and, without another word walked over to his horse. With some difficulty, for his right hand and arm were useless, he got himself into the saddle, and started back up the canyon, the way he had come.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" marveled Gay, as he clattered across the bridge and disappeared from sight around the bend. "Of all the crazy performances! What do you suppose got into him, Alec, to make him behave like that?"

Her brother-in-law shrugged. "Search me! Him and Joe Chapman was old friends, and he might've got the notion into his fool head that we wasn't handlin' this business just right. More likely, though, he wanted to show off. Mallory, I hope you won't judge the rest of the boys by that cockeyed loon! I'm not runnin' the A Bar W as an institution for the feeble-minded!"

He tried to speak lightly, but it was evident that he had not regained complete control of himself. He had vented his wrath on the offending puncher, but it had by no means entirely subsided. His naturally florid face was still hotly flushed, and his big hands were doubled into fists.

Blaze regarded him briefly.

"All right," said he. "That's that. You want to take a look at that rimrock with me? Nobody but a fly could get up from here, but where that jackpine's growin' is a good place."

He did not wait for an answer, but strode down the trail, scanning the almost vertical height of the canyon wall. Close to the solitary jackpine, there was a diagonal break in the strata, where the softer rock had weathered away and left a tilted projection or ledge which ran obliquely upward across the face of the cliff. It was so narrow that there was not room for two to go abreast, and in places it was partially blocked by rubble and piles of shale. But it offered a means of ascent

to the rim perfectly practicable for any reasonably active person.

Blaze went first, testing each hand- and foot-hold before trusting his weight to it. Gay Carson, as agile as a mountain goat and almost as sure of foot, was close behind him, while Alec Webster and Ward Sterling brought up the rear.

Half-way up, Blaze spoke over his shoulder.

"This is the way Joe came up this mornin'," he said. "There's fresh breaks in the shale; it's been walked on since the rain. And here's a branch off a bush that's hardly withered. You watch your step, Miss Gay, and don't look down. You'd get a nasty fall if you should slip or lose your balance."

The diagonal course carried the little party some hundreds of feet beyond the spot where the bodies lay in the trail. At the end of the ledge, Blaze changed his direction, and they all made their way back along the top of the canyon wall, as close to its edge as they safely could. Extreme caution was necessary, for broad patches of the rock were rotten and disintegrating, and it slanted sharply toward the rim on one side. On the other, with only a short stretch of rough and uneven ground between, it rose in a bare and flinty slope.

All at once, Gay Carson caught at Blaze's sleeve.

"Look!" she cried. "Look there, Blaze, on those stones! Isn't that blood?"

Almost at their feet, bright against the powdery gray of a wide vein of quartz, was a great splash of scarlet. Several smaller splashes and a smeared spatter of red drops were rusty and dried on the steep, slanting slabs of the rimrock.

Blaze nodded. "Yes," he said, "it's blood. Joe Chapman's blood. He was almost where you're standin' when Tanner shot him. The slug knocked him backward, off his feet. His body slid down to the rim, and then just dropped out into space. It's lyin' right below us now, on the trail."

Alec Webster and the Easterner came hurrying up.

"You've found the place where Joe was killed?" Ward exclaimed.

"Uh-huh. But if we haven't found somethin' that's a lot more important, I'm a sheepherder. Look yonder!" He pointed ahead of them and, while Ward and Gay steered uncomprehendingly, Alec Webster bit back an oath. A huge boulder was poised on the very edge of the lip of rock overhanging the bridge!

A number of stout poles that had evidently been used as levers to pry it from its bed were stacked against a tree behind it. Flat, heavy stones had been pushed under it to keep it from settling back into the deep hollow from which it had been laboriously raised.

It must have weighed several hundred pounds; yet so nicely was it balanced that only a slight impetus would have been required to set it rolling down over the edge of the rimrock, to crash onto the bridge directly below. It was as ingenious and hellish an engine of destruction as could have been devised to make cold-blooded and premeditated murder look like an accident!

CHAPTER V

Why Joe Chapman Died

COLD - BLOODED, premeditated murder, made to look like a tragic but unavoidable accident! That was the thought which came instantly to Blaze Mallory's mind, the thought toward which the Easterner was perplexedly groping, as he said slowly:

"That never got there by itself; it was put there! Tanner couldn't have planned—"

"He planned to give that rock a shove at the proper time and when the proper person was under it, that's what he

planned!" Blaze said quietly. " 'Twouldn't take much of a push to send it down onto that bridge—and on to anyone who happened to be goin' across the bridge when it dropped! Which you can gamble Joe Chapman saw, his eyesight bein' just as good as yours or mine."

"But what in hell would Joe Chapman be snoopin' around up here for?" demanded Alec Webster, in a harsh voice. "You're assumin' he knew that thing was here and he come up to look for it, are you, Mallory?"

"No. I'm assumin' he came up here to look out across the vega and see if he could raise me on my way from Blue Chip. I'd sent him word I was goin' to pay him a little visit, and that he could expect me some time this mornin'. This Tanner and his pals had been puttin' the finishin' touches onto their job and were waitin' their chance to use it, when Joe marches right in amongst 'em. They could get outa sight themselves, but they couldn't hide their murder machine, and Joe spotted it.

"It wouldn't take him more'n a thousand years to guess what it was for. Mebbe," Blaze Mallory's voice dropped; an odd, absent expression came into his gray eyes, "mebbe *who* it was for. And those sidewinders knew it. So Tanner shot him."

"Who it was for?" the girl echoed. "I reckon I'm awfully dull, Blaze, but I don't quite understand. You say Joe guessed what the rock was for, maybe whom it was for. Was for him?"

Gravely, Blaze shook his head. "No, Miss Gay. It wasn't for Joe. If they'd wanted to get rid of Joe, and had stewed and sweated to make the killin' look like an accident, it'd have come off accordin' to schedule when he walked down the canyon alone and crossed the bridge. They could never have asked for a better chance. But they didn't bother their heads about him—not until he climbed up here on the rim and saw that rock. Then they killed him. They had to, to shut his mouth. Miss Gay, Joe Chapman died because he knew too much!"

"Oh, poor Joe!" Gay cried. "As if he cared two bits about that Amity gang's drunken quarrels!"

"The whole bunch could have killed each other off any way they liked and welcome, for all the difference it would have made to Joe," Ward Sterling added bitterly, in his clipped Eastern voice. "And if that man Tanner had used his head, he'd have realized it, too. But when he saw Joe walking toward him, he was probably too flustered to think."

"Well, but who in his place wouldn't be?" Alec Webster put in, mopping his dripping forehead with his handkerchief. "Tanner'd no business on the Spur range at all, and he knew it. He wouldn't 've been able to think of anything except that his game was up unless he bucked Joe off in a hurry. Which he done, damn his murderin' soul to hell!"

Blaze had no audible comment to make; but he was reflecting, somewhat cynically, that the late unlamented Mr. Tanner wasn't the only person open to the accusation, just or unjust, of failing to use his head! Here were three normally intelligent people jumping to a conclusion that was palpably absurd, even in the light of such meager knowledge as they possessed, and ignoring all the plain and essential factors!

For the present, however, Blaze was content that they should ignore them—especially the true significance of the big boulder so delicately poised above the bridge across the trail. The trail that led directly to the Spur in a Circle ranch house! A curious place for a strange gunman, who had no business on the Spur range at all, to set a trap for some other strange gunman from a camp in the ghost city, miles away!

"Mallory, don't you think—"

"I think we'd best get that rock back in its proper place, Mr. Webster. At the best of it, we'll save you folks a job of bridge buildin', in case we get an extra high wind."

Blaze rolled up his shirt sleeves, and they all set to work. Using a couple of

the stout wooden poles as levers and another for a fulcrum, he and Alec Webster tilted the inner side of the boulder up just far enough for the Easterner to pull out the stones which had been wedged beneath it to keep it in place.

"All ready, now. I'll give the word. Stand clear!" he shouted, and jumped back out of harm's way as Webster let go of the second pole. It flew from the rancher's hands as if animated with a strange life of its own, smacked against the rock, and splintered into fragments.

The great boulder stirred, quivered. Then, with a dull, ominous rumble, it rolled back and away from the edge of the rimrock. A cloud of fine, dusty particles marked its transit and hung above it in the hot air, as it settled itself in its old sandy bed.

"Whew! I'll feel a lot more comfortable when I cross that bridge again, knowin' that baby's back where it belongs, instead of hangin' over my head, all ready to drop and mash what few brains I've got!" Alec Webster observed. He mopped his brow again with his pocket handkerchief, resumed his coat, and led the way down the steep path to the canyon floor, the others following in silence. "But I reckon we ought to leave everything else the way it is until the sheriff gets here, huh, Mallory?"

"Yes, more or less," agreed Blaze. "Except I don't see what harm it'd do to take Joe's body home and, for that matter, move them others outa the sun. And Tanner's bunch must've hid their hosses somewheres; they didn't walk here."

"The horses are probably tied in the Crescent," spoke up Gay. "That's a ravine opening out of the canyon about half a mile above here, not far from where the old Amity trail branches off. It turns and runs parallel with Corkscrew the other side of the ridge, and ends up just below the bridge. Coming from Amity, Tanner could have turned into the Crescent, left the horses there, and climbed up to the rimrock without leaving any sign that would arouse suspicion."

"Good!" Blaze said. "Then it oughtn't to take much trouble to locate the hosses and look out for 'em." He addressed Alec Webster. "I'm sorry to have to unload all these little jobs on you folks, Mr. Webster," he said, "but I reckon I've got to be gettin' along."

"Getting along, Blaze? Where?"

"Why, to that ghost city, Miss Gay, where the sidewinders' nest is."

"Oh, but you mustn't!" the girl exclaimed, aghast at the suggestion. "You mustn't think of doing such a thing. It would be just plain suicide, wouldn't it, Alec?"

"It would," nodded the rancher. "Gay's right, Mallory. We don't know much about that gang, or how many there is of 'em; but you can take it from me that you'd just be waltzin' into a jam that, ten to one, you'd never come out of alive."

"I've waltzed into jams before, Mr. Webster, and come out all in one piece," Blaze returned calmly.

"But this ain't necessary!" the rancher insisted. "I've got to get back to the A Bar W for a couple of hours. Holmes Raymond, the big cattle buyer from Top Notch City, has been waitin' there to see me since yesterday—and Gay's got to be at the bank in Blue Chip before it closes. I'll ride around with her and we'll notify the sheriff and gave him the straight of this thing. Tacklin' that Amity crowd is his job—his and his deputies—not yours. You and Ward can—"

"Except that Joe Chapman was a friend of mine, it's the sheriff's job; yes, Mr. Webster. But 'twas some of that Amity crowd killed Joe, and it's to Amity that the trail leads—the only clue we've got to the whole dirty business."

"But if there's anything to be found out in Amity, the sheriff'll get on to it as well as you can—mebbe better," argued Webster. "He's a right good

man, smart as they make 'em, and he won't lose no time."

"He'll lose more'n I will; he can't help it," cut in Blaze, with quiet decision. "And it might be that time'll count for more in this than any of us has an idea now."

"But I tell you, Mallory—"

"Mr. Webster, you lose a sack of gold dust, and if you're awful lucky, you may find it again sometime. You lose a few minutes or hours, and no matter how lucky you are, you can't never get 'em back; they're gone for good. So if that's all, I reckon I'll be ridin'."

He bowed to Gay, swung into the saddle, and, turning the black gelding's head, galloped away up the canyon. Ward Sterling uttered a repressed exclamation. "We can't let him do that!" he said sharply, and grabbed for his horse's bridle. "No, Gay; it's no use to argue, you know we can't! If Mallory's bound to go, then I'm going with him, that's all!"

"Say, stop at the Spur and send some of the boys down here with a wagon and blankets, will you?" Alec shouted after him as he put spurs to his mount. "And tell 'em to look in the Crescent for them hosses of Tanner's. And, Ward, see if you can't persuade Mallory to keep away from Amity now!"

"I'll do my best, Alec," Ward shouted back, and clattered in pursuit of Blaze who, when he heard the thudding of hoofs on the trail behind him, turned to look over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute, please!" the Easterner called to him. "I'm going along with you."

"Yeah?" If the announcement were a welcome one to Blaze, he managed successfully to dissemble his enthusiasm. "You don't need to bother. I'm pretty much used to dependin' on myself, you know, and not on outside help."

"Implying that I'll be more bother than help?"

"If you want to put it that way."

The young Easterner flushed. "Thanks," he said stiffly. "I may be a tenderfoot, but I'd like to point out to you that because a man is born east of the Mississippi doesn't necessarily mean he's born without guts. Furthermore, I can shoot a gun, and sometimes I even hit what I aim at. One other thing, Mr. Mallory. It gravels me to see a man I like and admire ride into serious danger alone. Unless you absolutely forbid me, I shall go with you, to preserve my own self-respect!"

For a long instant, Blaze Mallory eyed him bleakly. Then one shoulder lifted in a little shrugging gesture.

"Oh, all right," said he. "Come along, and keep your self-respect, if it means so much to you. But I'm warnin' you that you stand a good chance of losin' everything else!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

You won't want to miss the Christmas story

Bounce Trims the Tree

A tale of romance under the mistletoe

By MARIE De NERVAUD

In the Second December Issue

Aggravating Cowhand

By Stephen Payne

He was the orneriest and laziest man Mary had ever met. Exasperated, yet fascinated by him, she held her temper until her father was robbed. Then the fireworks began!

MARY McLEOD stood near the well in the ranchyard watching the Bar 9 outfit pull out for the spring calf round-up. The girl's smooth oval face flushed with the thrill of excitement; her blue eyes sparkled, and a vagrant wind touching her soft dark hair brought all its luster to life. From a window of the tidy log house Mother was also watching, and yet a third spectator sat on a nail keg in front of the bunkhouse.

This individual, with wide hat pushed back so that sunlight poured full upon

his unlined brown face and his half-closed brown eyes, was whittling a stick as idly as if this splendid sight held no thrill for him. So much Mary McLeod noted in one swift glance, and puzzled lines penciled between her dark eyebrows before she again paid strict attention to the round-up crew.

Rumble and creak and rattle of the old chuck wagon piled high with tarp covered beds; old "Froggy" on the seat, handling the ribbons of four fractious horses. Behind that sturdy wagon, the cavvy, like the trained animals of a circus, was stringing out. Bay horses and blacks, browns, duns, whites, sorrels, pintos, grays, all with trimmed tails, all fat and sassy, ready for the grueling days ahead.

Flanking the cavvy came the riders of the Bar 9; fuzzy-cheeked kids as full of spirits as the horses; men in the prime of life, tougher than rawhide, steel-nerved; the grizzled old-timers, those "stove-up sons of the alkali" who were always and forever going to quit but never did quit for long.

Mary McLeod knew why. The fascination of the hardships and adventures of this grand life held them even as it lured the youngsters. "Some outfit!" she thought, pride tightening her throat and glowing in her fine eyes. "There isn't a better one in all western Colorado." She was waving her right hand. "So long, boys. Good-bye, Daw."

But Daw Baird, foreman of the Bar 9 for more years than Mary could remember, had turned his horse and was loping back toward her. As he reined up his black champed the bit, fidgeting with eagerness to be off.

"Mary, I'm plain worried about how you're goin' to get along with that yearlin' lunker we had to leave as chore boy." Daw's faded eyes flicked toward the whittler in front of the bunkhouse.

"Yearlin?" The girl laughed softly. "Daw, I'd say he's a three-year-old. Leastwise he's got his growth. Is he really a lunker?"

"A knot on a log's a cyclone compared to that jasper. He's just too damn lazy even to roll hisself a smoke. Don't savvy nothin' about cows nor hosses nor ranches neither."

"How funny, when you consider that Dad hired this Henry Stevens."

"Ain't it though? Old Tom McLeod don't go wrong in pickin' a man nor a hoss nor a bull. But this time," Baird shook his grizzled head, "the old man jogs to town to catch the train and go east to buy us a bunch of bulls, and he sends this worthless jigger to the ranch."

"I wonder why," said Mary. "And he took pains to write you a letter saying, 'Daw, use a heap of patience with Henry Stevens. Don't you fire him. But leave the queer jasper to do the chores while you go on the round-up.' "

"No savvy it a-tall," rumbled the foreman. "Well, maybeso you can get sweat outa him. I shore couldn't!"

He loosed rein and his horse broke into a furious gallop to overtake chuck wagon, cavvy and riders. Music of cavvy bells, growing fainter and fainter, blended with the sweet song of a meadow lark and warred with the discordant squawk of a magpie.

Mary became aware that the sun, having climbed above the towering blue-green, agate and dun mountains to eastward, was now flooding the Bar 9's sagebrush pastures and dark green fields with glorious light. She became aware, too, with a sudden sense of loneliness that she was now alone on the old ranch with only her mother and the new hand, the worthless yet somehow mysterious Henry Stevens.

A vast longing to be in the saddle herself, riding the round-up as she had done long ago with her dad, possessed her. Too bad one couldn't always be merely a girl. Becoming a woman—a very desirable, attractive one at that—had certain serious drawbacks.

If only she had been the boy Dad had so wanted. Then she wouldn't be faced with this problem of getting safely married. Safely married. Hmm! Mother seemed to think that the only thing for her daughter, though Daddy said nothing whatever. He didn't even offer an opinion when at last—for Mary

had taken days and weeks and months before deciding—"Gusty" George Altiers had announced with his usual bombast:

"Well, Tom, old man, congratulate your neighbor. We're engaged, Mary and I!"

Mary remembered how Dad had immediately sort of frozen up. Didn't he like Altiers? She suspected he didn't. She herself could never quite be sure why and how she had accepted the man. Moonlight and romance; a glib line of talk; fascination perhaps.

Abruptly breaking away from her retrospective mood, and with a certain mischievous gleam in her blue eyes, the girl walked across to the weather-beaten bunkhouse.

Henry Stevens looked up from his whittling. Dancing brown eyes, far more mischievous and inscrutable than Mary's own, gave her a cool, half-amused glance. A backward flip of his head—a well-shaped head, the brown face a little bit full and round but the lower jaw firm and strong—tossed his slouch hat from the thick mat of his brown curly hair. Lazily he got to his feet.

Mary, prepared to give the fellow a piece of her mind, hesitated, finding about the man a certain masculine charm which moved her strangely. Pshaw! Her only interest in Henry Stevens was due to Dad's sending him to the ranch, with word to Daw Baird not to fire him.

Wordlessly she reached up and from the breast pocket of his tan shirt took his makin's. The diamond on her left hand flashed in the sunlight as she deftly whipped up a neat cigarette. She handed it to the man.

"Smoke, Henry? Daw Baird says you're too darned lazy even to roll yourself a pill."

"Thanks." Henry Stevens lighted and took a deep drag on the cigarette. He blew flickering smoke rings. Mary felt the grip of frustration and rising anger.

"If you think you can sit in the sun while I'm boss you've another think coming, Mister Stevens. Three panels of that corral have tumbled down. Reset the posts; rebuild the fence."

"Yes, Miss McLeod. Better you show me how to do it."

"Even a tenderfoot could set a post. Where'd you come from that you're so helpless?"

"I've been 'most every place, Miss Mary."

"Riding the grub line, I suppose. How else have you managed to keep on eating? Get a wiggle on yourself and come with me."

Mary led the new hand to the blacksmith shop where she pointed out a pick, an ax, a shovel and a crowbar which Henry Stevens eyed as if they were mortal enemies.

"Miss McLeod, a fellow'd blister his hands somethin' terrible usin' them things."

"I suppose whittling never blistered your soft, lily-white hands!"

As she spoke, Mary noticed the fellow's hands were neither soft nor lily-white. They were big, rugged, short-fingered hands, capable of grasping any sort of implement and holding on it, too.

"Anyhow I'll need gloves," Henry broke the silence. "And I'm all outa gloves."

In exasperation Mary picked up the tools. "Wake up, Henry! We're going to the corrals."

"Umn? I just happened to remember I ain't watered the stud yet this mornin'."

"Nor fed him either, I suppose? How about your own saddle nag? Taking any better care of him than of the Bar 9 stock?"

"That hoss of mine is plumb used to neglect."

Why was it, thought Mary, that when this fellow grinned and those dancing lights of mischief filled his eyes, she couldn't possibly stay mad at him?

"Cloudin' up like it might rain," he went on. "You don't ask your chore boy

to work outside in a fierce downpour, do you?"

Mary couldn't help laughing. "I'll find a dozen things for you to do under a roof; cleaning the stable, tidying the bunkhouse; oiling and repairing harness, sharpening axes and saws. We make our own butter so you can churn, too. Well, water Theodore and curry him—if you know what a curry comb is!"

"Shucks! Hosses roll to knock some of the dirt off themselves. I'll let Theodore take a good roll in the dust and—Say, look who's comin. . . . Long, hungry-lookin' geezer, but a flashy dresser. Silver conchas shinin' on his bridle. That hat and them boots and spurs must've set him back three months' wages."

"George Altiers doesn't work for wages," said Mary with spirit. "He has gumption enough to own a small cow outfit. A pearl-gray beaver Stetson might look better on *your* head than that dust-colored relic."

The girl shot a challenging look at young Stevens, hoping she had stung him. But again she was disappointed. The new hand had not winced; his eyes still retained their twinkle.

"I reckon," he drawled, "them as has can splurge and put on the dog. This feller now with the thin face, and the li'le mustache I betcha he's right proud of, is all swole up with pride. Sorta figgers he's cuttin' a wide swath. . . . What makes you look so funny, Miss McLeod?"

Instead of answering Mary called, "Hello, Gusty. Riding early today?"

With a grand flourish Gusty George swept off his Stetson. His teeth shone through his smile; his sharp black eyes glowed at sight of the spirited girl. "Riding early so we can put in the full day together, dear," he answered. "How about it? We haven't been to Mirror Lake this spring."

Mary heard Henry Stevens murmur under his breath, "'Gusty'? I savvy. It's his voice. It's shore got a lot of volume."

"Well," temporized the girl, vaguely annoyed to feel that she didn't really want to ride with George Altiers today. And why not? Because she wanted to be with this very peculiar, provoking Henry Stevens and if possible learn how any man could be so plain lazy.

Gusty George was taking notice of the new hand. "What's your name, fellow? I haven't seen you before. I'm George Altiers of the Four Y spread, down country a piece. Best small ranch in this neck of the woods. And I've got four hundred cattle under my iron."

"Always bragging!" thought Mary. "Won't George ever learn? Henry Stevens just said, 'All swole up with pride. Sorta figgers he's cuttin' a wide swath.' And Henry's dead right!"

Stevens had answered, "That's swelligant, Mr. Altiers. All I've got is an old crowbait saddle hoss under another man's iron. Of course you done all the gettin' together and the buildin' up of that spread your ownself?"

Was he making fun of Gusty George whom everyone knew had inherited the Four Y? It certainly sounded that way to Mary and, for some reason, Altiers was no longer smiling. Shifting in his saddle he said shortly, "Get your hat, Mary dear. I'll be saddling your horse."

GUSTY and Mary were finally out on the trail leading toward the aloof and massive mountains, where swiftly gathering storm clouds were already veiling the highest peaks.

Gusty George said abruptly: "I don't like that fellow. Wonder if he can be trusted?"

"What made you say that, George? What are you thinking?"

Altiers carefully readjusted his expensive hat. "We-ll, I wouldn't want to alarm you and Mrs. McLeod a-tall, but your dad don't keep that safe in his office just to store valuable papers in.

Now that he's gone, and likewise the round-up crew, there's just you two women and a fellow you really don't know a thing about on the ranch. I don't like it much."

"Why so suspicious all at once?" Mary demanded. "Anyhow, the safe is always locked."

"Which, unfortunately, wouldn't stop a clever thief," George remarked. "Sweetheart, did I tell you you look more beautiful than ever this morning? Can't we get married next week, or better still, tomorrow? Please say yes."

However, as she had done many times before, Mary again put the man off. For his part he was far more persistent, more persuasive than ever. So much so that it struck her he must have some urgent reason for wanting their wedding to take place at once.

Was some other problem troubling Altiers? Hardly likely when he always bragged that he owned his entire outfit clear of debt. And managing the Four Y certainly didn't wear on Gusty George at all, for he spent far more time in town or gadding about the country, swapping horses, matching races with this neighbor and that, than he did at home.

As a rancher, Altiers believed in letting the hired man do the work. But, for some reason unknown to Mary McLeod, he had no hired help at present. It was no use to ask him about his business because he always shut off her inquiries with a gusty, prideful, "Don't trouble your pretty head about it. Everythin's lookin' right up with me. First class. Couldn't be better."

Today the girl of the Nine Bar found herself contrasting George Altiers with thriftless, shiftless Henry Stevens, the most aggravating darned fellow she had ever met. She must not give him a second thought.

Nevertheless, for all this firm resolve, Mary McLeod didn't enjoy any part of this day's ride. For one thing, a fierce downpour that struck about three o'clock drenched both her and her escort. During this sharp shower the girl suddenly remembered that a couple of hundred Bar 9 cows were on a certain strip of range known as Poison Weed Flat.

This was the time of year when the weed—wild larkspur—was dangerous if it got wet. Mary mentioned her sudden fear to Gusty George, and together they dashed down from the mountains, crossed the river valley a mile above the ranch buildings and went on lickety-split to the poison weed area.

Mary, half-sick with worry as she rode, felt amazement and relief such as she'd seldom known when they found there were no cattle on that wide flat. But farther to the north a narrow valley, free of larkspur, was alive with cattle. This indicated that the herd had been driven from the dangerous area.

"I guess we can thank some good neighbor," said Mary.

Discovering the tracks a shod horse had made since the cessation of the rain, she stepped from her saddle to examine them closely. Gusty George watched her, half-amused.

"Such neighbors as we've got," he remarked, "would be glad to see the rich and powerful Bar 9 lose a lot of stock from poison weed. They're jealous of us."

"Of you, too, do you mean?" asked the girl pointedly.

"I said 'us,' sweetheart, because I feel that the Bar 9 belongs—I mean that I belong to the Bar 9 as much—"

"I get it," Mary cut in shortly, and mounted her sorrel. "Well, those tracks told me nothing. . . . I'm cold. Let's hurry home."

The moment they reached the ranch buildings, Mary's first glance was toward that one certain tumbledown corral. The fence was exactly as when she had last seen it. Paying no attention to Gusty George, who was trying to hold her hand, trying to tell her once again how great was his love and how delightful it would prove for them both if only she would marry him at

once, the girl loped up in front of the house.

"Mother, where's that — Where's Henry?"

Mrs. McLeod, appearing at the door, answered, "I declare I don't know. Of all the useless men we ever had on this ranch he's the worst. Soon after you two left—and I do hope you had a lovely ride," the woman paused to smile happily at tall, dark, thin-featured Altiers, "that fellow got his fish pole and rode up the river. I called to him, but he pretended not to hear."

"Not back yet, either," observed Gusty George. "I'd hang the can on him, Mary. You will, won't you?"

In spite of Mary's thorough vexation at the new hand some perversity prompted her to answer sharply, "No! I'm going to see if I can't make him over. I've never had any luck making you over, Geoge."

"George doesn't need any making over," said Mrs. McLeod fatuously. "Mary, the cows must be milked and we must have wood for the kitchen stove."

"I'll wrangle the milk cows," Mary announced. "George'll chop some wood."

"Your wood pile's plumb gone. No wood to chop," said George. "Besides I'm alone. I've got to lope home and tend to my own chores."

Mary's "good-bye" was very brief as she rode to find the Bar 9 milk herd. It was full dark when she drove the cows into their corral. Before she stabled her sorrel she dragged up a couple of poles from the unrepaired corral. Afterwards, by lantern light, she sawed one pole into lengths, split these and carried them into the house.

Now that Mother could make a fire and start supper, Mary did the milking, fed the skim-milk calves; she cared for the Percheron stallion and her own pony and when supper was over she grimly waited for the appearance of the man who should have done all these chores.

AT NINE, Henry Stevens, nonchalant and unconcerned as if nothing was the matter, clumped into the house. Holding eleven rainbow trout on a willow stick aloft for Mary to see he asked:

"Can I get some chuck?"

Mary glared at the man. He was wet to his belt. His hat and shirt looked as if earlier today he had been completely soaked through. "You should be proud of yourself, leaving two women to do the chores!" she flashed. "No wood! No water! Cows to milk, calves to feed, horses to be cared for! And at nine o'clock you dangle in from fishing and demand your supper!"

Henry Stevens tipped his slouch hat down over his eyes and scratched his hair. "Hmn? Now I sorta allowed Gusty would take care o' them trifles. He was right gallant toward you, Miss Mary, so I can't figger how he'd leave two ladies in the lurch that-a-way."

Mary's color flared high. "George had his own work to do. Besides, you're being paid to— Oh, what's the use of arguing with a dumb stick-in-the-mud who doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain? Aren't you scared that you'll get rheumatism or pneumonia? Only this morning the idea of blistering your hands seemed to horrify you."

At last she was rewarded. At last she had stung him. His neck, his face, even his forehead turned slowly red. Without meeting the angry girl's eyes, he laid down his fish and stirred up the almost dead fire in the kitchen range. He put on fresh wood, set the coffee pot on the stove. Then he reached for a skillet and asked:

"Where-at's the bacon fat, Miss Mary?"

Mary told him. She sank into a chair and watched the strange fellow, watched him when she should have been going to bed. Either that or—a little reproachful voice was telling her —cooking a meal for this tired, hungry man. Easy to tell that he was both

tired and hungry. So? Tired from fishing when he should have been working! She'd just be darned if she'd relent.

Henry put three of his trout on to cook, sat down and reached for his makin's. "You care to roll me one, Mary?"

"Never again!"

"Never again?" mused the man, regretfully pocketing his tobacco and papers. "We-ll, if the time ever comes when you want to forget that cold turn-down and sorta show me things are hunky, you'll know what to do!"

The girl studied him with half-veiled eyes. Why should he think the time would ever come when she'd desire to make up with him? "Henry, what makes you act so darned ornery?" she demanded.

"Me? Ornery? Miss Mary, I'm the peacefulest cuss. Easy-goin', easy to get along with and—"

"You know what I mean. I'll take back that 'dumb.' You aren't dumb. You're just—I don't know what."

Mary got up abruptly, turned out of the kitchen and went to bed. After a long time she heard the new hand, the enigma, leave the house, and then at last sleep put an end to her puzzling about something she could not understand at all.

DAWN once again, and once again Henry Stevens made the girl of the Bar 9 furious. She called him three times before at last he sauntered forth from the bunkhouse. Whereupon Mary presented him with the milk pails. "Get these minor chores done before breakfast," she said sarcastically.

Henry disposed of the milking chore by turning the skim milk calves in with the milk cows, who had not forgotten their offspring. With unabashed enjoyment the man was watching the lusty young bovines perform the duty which was his when Mary caught him.

"You—you! Well, just wait till Dad gets home. When I tell him—"

"Yep!" agreed Henry grinning. "Nice fella, old man McLeod. Too bad he's due for such a fierce bawlin' out."

"Nothing to what you'll get! Come to breakfast. I want you to have strength enough to chop and haul a load of firewood."

Breakfast over, Henry wrangled a team, hitched it to the running gears of a wagon and departed. . . . Three hours later he returned—with no wood. Mary met him in the yard, red flags of danger flying in her cheeks.

Henry grinned at her. Then his brown face took on an expression of grave concern. "An ax is a powerful tricky thing. Cut my foot. Would you please doctor it up?"

Fearing the wound might be serious, Mary raced to the house for bandages and antiseptic. She joined Henry in the bunkhouse, pulled off his boot, removed his sock, and then sprang to her feet, eyes blazing. The blade of the ax had barely touched his skin, hardly scratching it.

"You big baby! If you'd pricked yourself with a porcupine quill it would have been worse."

Henry pretended to misunderstand her. "You don't think I'll get lockjaw or blood poison?"

"You're unbearable. Pack your warsack. Daddy won't find you here after all!"

Mary rushed from the bunkhouse and, not wanting her mother to see her hot, angry face just then, she ran to the barn, there to ask comfort of her sorrel pony.

But Henry's horse, backed half out of its stall and standing with one hind foot cocked at ease, caught her attention. For a half minute she stared unbelievingly at that shod hoof before she stepped into the stall and lifted one of the horse's front feet.

Exclaiming, "Well, I'd never have dreamed it!" the girl of the Bar 9 swiftly returned to the bunkhouse,

where she found Henry Stevens calmly washing his feet.

"What are you playing here?" she demanded stormily. "What's your game?"

"Game?" Henry lifted his eyes to the girl's flushed face. "I ain't so very hot at games. Take poker now. I can play just fast enough to lose—"

"Henry, you're easily the most maddening person I ever saw in my whole life! Here, I brought you a clean pair of Dad's socks."

The tall figure of Gusty Atliers loomed unexpectedly in the doorway. "Mary!" he snapped. "What's going on here?"

Mary felt strangely guilty, so guilty that her voice held a knife edge. "Nothing so out of the way as you seem to imagine, Gusty," she flared. "Henry nicked his foot with an ax and I was doctoring it."

"How nice—for Henry!" Gusty George's dark eyes drew to pin-points. "Darned if I can see any cut on either of his hoofs. You know, sweetheart, if this bird was working for me I'd fire him so quick it'd make his head swim."

Henry pulled his boots on over the clean socks. "I've already been told to pack my warbag," he remarked cheerfully. "You needin' a hand, Mr. Altiers?"

"No! Not like you! You *have* fired him, Mary?"

But to the vast astonishment of both men Mary McLeod answered, "I'm taking that back, Henry. Now if you feel it won't tax your strength *too* greatly, go and get that load of wood."

"I'll go with the loafer and see to it that he does!" Gusty grimly announced.

NTERING the main house a few minutes later, Mary fervently wished that her father was at home, or that he would appear unexpectedly. She needed to talk with the grizzled, kindly old father who understood her better than anyone else. But he didn't come. No one at all appeared until evening, when Henry Stevens, alone, returned to the Bar 9 with a big load of logs.

Both Mary and her mother met him in the yard, the older woman inquiring sharply, "Where's Mr. Altiers?"

"I reckon," drawled Henry, "he must've rid straight home."

Dismayed, Mrs. McLeod exclaimed, "But that isn't like George. Surely he'd have stopped by to—"

"To boast how he forced Henry to chop and load these logs," Mary broke in, watching the pronounced twinkle in Henry Stevens' brown eyes and wondering exactly what that twinkle might mean.

"Mary, I don't like the way you said that," spoke Mrs. McLeod reprovingly. "At least George did force the laziest man in the world to work today!" After pausing until Henry, leading the team to the stable, was out of earshot, she continued, "You're taking far too much interest in that worthless fellow. For that reason, as well as some others, I think the sooner you and George are married the better."

"Oh? So he's told you he was in a terrific yank to get the wedding over with?" asked Mary.

"Yes, this morning before he saw you and Henry in the bunkhouse."

"Did he say why he was in such a hurry?"

"A man's reasons. I remember your own father was dreadfully impatient, too. Daughter, you've much yet to learn about men."

"Much to learn about George and Henry, particularly Henry," said Mary musingly. "Yesterday evening he moved our cattle off of Poison Weed Flat ahead of the storm, saving us at least six or eight head as well as lots of grief."

"Did Henry Stevens tell you he did that?"

"He did not tell me. The tracks of his horse told the story. I haven't a doubt either that he stayed out late last night seeing to it that the cattle didn't drift back while the weed was

still wet and dangerous. Only a man who savvies range stuff would have done that. One minute I'd like to wring his darned neck; the next—"

The girl's voice trailed off. Abruptly leaving her mother, she corralled the milk herd, got the buckets and waylaid Henry Stevens after he had cared for the horses in the stable.

"If George could get some real work out of you, so can I," she announced. "Now I'll stand over you with a club while you milk."

Henry opened wide his brown eyes. "Let's compromise, Mary. Rather'n be clubbed I'll milk the heifers all proper if you'll roll me a smoke."

"No!"

Henry sighed. "Ain't you got no sympathy, Mary?"

"I've far too much sympathy for grub-liners and saddle-bums! Come along." They went to the corral.

"Show me how it's done so I'll sorta get the hang of it," Henry requested and placed the milk stool beside old Spot.

Without knowing exactly how it happened, Mary found herself milking the spotted cow. Henry squatted on his heels, intently watching her, telling funny stories one after another. Twin streamers of milk flashed into the foaming pail and, before Mary realized it, Spot was milked dry.

She stopped laughing, her face on fire as she realized how she had been "worked." "Henry, the lesson's over. You milk Brindle."

It seemed as if this time Henry couldn't get out of the chore. But Brindle kicked him galley-west in addition to upsetting the half-filled pail.

"You did something to her!" Mary accused wrathfully.

"Not a blamed thing. This cow's just naturally ornery."

Brindle kicked him again the moment he touched her, so in desperation, Mary took over the job. She milked Brindle while Henry continued his anecdotes. After five angry minutes the girl found herself laughing once again.

From the house Mrs. McLeod called, "I must have some wood for the stove."

"I suppose you'll find some way to make me cut that, too," said Mary making a face.

Henry drew a deep breath, shrugged and sauntered from corral to wood pile. Every movement seemed a study in laziness, but he sawed up one log, split it and carried the wood into the kitchen. He drew water from the well and filled the pails after which he sat himself down at the supper table.

Mary had determined she would not eat at the same table with him. Yet she did, watching Henry until at last he remarked, "If only I had an after-supper smoke now. . . . Please take a leaf from my dream book and roll me up a bright idea, Mary."

"What bright idea did George think of to make you work, Henry?"

A grin, pleasing and wholly disarming lighted the man's brown face. "He'd sorta like to be a regular slave driver, that Gusty guy. Grab that ax! Now raise a sweat and plenty blisters hackin' down them trees! That sort of bluster."

"And the bluster produced good results. I suppose your poor, lily-white hands are all splinters and blisters?"

"Well, no. You'll hate me worse'n ever, Miss Mary. But Gusty's ridin' gauntlets and his disposition was both sorta wrecked by the time he got them logs cut and loaded."

"George chopped down and loaded the firewood?" Mary exclaimed incredulously.

"I simply bet him four-bits I was a better axman'n he was and that he couldn't hit twice in the same place. We-ll, he couldn't, and it made him that proddy he just kept choppin', tryin' for to hit twice in the same place."

"Oh!" Mary's eyes were shining. This Henry, to use a range expression, "took the biscuit and the pan they were baked in!" Mary asked, "How'd you persuade him to load the logs?"

"After he'd lost the bet, Gusty was grouchy and sore as the devil 'bout somethin' or other; said he was a scrap-

per from 'way back and he'd enjoy eatin' me alive. Naturally I wasn't honin' to be made a meal out of without somethin' big at stake, so I propositioned him again—loser to load the wood on the wagon."

"Henry! You two didn't really fight? Why, there isn't a mark on you!"

"Some under my shirt where you can't see 'em. But I didn't load that wood!"

"No wonder George didn't come past the ranch," said Mary, flushing as she remembered that she really should be furious with Henry.

"Don't blame me too much," the man drawled resignedly. "'Cause none of this would've happened if only you'd fired me this mornin'."

"You were asking for it in no uncertain manner," mused the girl. "I suppost I disappointed you terribly by refusing to fire you?"

"You're sure no disappointment in any other respects, Mary." The expression of Henry's eyes and face abruptly changed, and that which the girl of the Bar 9 saw in those dark brown orbs, in that nut-brown face made her spring to her feet, twist the diamond ring on her finger and say a bit breathlessly:

"That's as far as— Good night."

MARY McLEOD did not sleep well. Up at daybreak, she started to cross the living-room when papers scattered helter-skelter on the floor in the vicinity of her father's steel safe drew her eyes to that strong box. Its door stood wide open and—as the girl of the Bar Nine quickly discovered—approximately nine thousand dollars which Tom McLeod had had on hand was missing!

Obeying her first impulse, Mary flew to the bunkhouse and beat her knuckles against the door, calling, "Henry! Henry!"

No answer; no sound at all from within the building. Thoroughly frightened and shocked now, the girl entered, stood as if frozen. Henry's bunk unoccupied; the large room empty!

What was it Gusty George had said? "I don't like that fellow. Wonder if he can be trusted? Your Dad don't keep that safe just to store valuable papers in."

"But—but Dad sent Henry to the Bar 9," Mary thought, aghast. "And though this is all so darned queer I believe Daddy knew what he was doing."

With this, she ran to the stable where her hope that Henry Stevens was not guilty died. Both his horse and his saddle were gone!

"I won't scare Mother to death yet," decided Mary. Saddling her sorrel in the dawn's early light she rode like a pony express rider across the sage hills to the Four Y ranch on Elm Creek. The girl flung out of her saddle, threw open Gusty George's unlocked door.

"George! Where are you?"

A voice from beyond a partition answered, "Is that you, Mary? I'll have my trousers on in a jiffy. Riding early, aren't you?"

"For a good reason. We've been robbed!"

"Robbed!" Buttoning his shirt, the owner of the Four Y bounded into the main room of his small home. "Tell me about it."

Mary hesitated. Why should she hate to tell Gusty George Altiers, the man to whom she was engaged, that Henry Stevens was in all probability a thief?

However Gusty, standing stiffly, and staring at the girl as if he was as shocked as she, rapped out, "Is that confounded loafer still on the Bar 9?"

"Henry's gone and so is the money!"

"So that's the way of it!" snapped the man. "I'll get my gun, then you ride for the sheriff while I hit that thief's trail."

"Why bother?" drawled a voice Mary had come to know well.

The girl spun about like a horse stung by a bee. Lounging against the door jamb, slouch hat pushed back, stood Henry Stevens.

"Stand hitched, George!" he went on, his tone abruptly changing as a whiplash quality crept into it. "Don't rush into your room to grab your smoker."

As though by magic a large Colt appeared in Henry's right hand, whereupon George promptly changed his mind about ducking out of the room.

"What in blazes is the idea?" he blustered loudly. "I wouldn't think you'd dare to come back, *thief!*"

Mary was watching both men, noting the sharp contrast between them. This morning Gusty sported a black eye. He was acting more like a cornered wolf than a rational human being, while Henry Stevens, for all his nonchalance had become a dominant force in full command of the situation.

"Don't you believe a word he says, Mary," resumed Gusty, having difficulty with his voice. "Fellow, give me a chance to shoot this out with you and I'll shut your damn mouth."

"'Twouldn't matter if you did," replied Henry. "You see, there's another man here to tell Miss McLeod the whole story. Come on in, Desmond."

"Desmond! Clyde Desmond? Did he—?" Gusty checked himself and bit off an oath.

A man, obviously of the city, and a complete stranger to Mary, stepped past Henry into the room.

"Miss McLeod," he began, while George glowered from him to Henry Stevens as if he'd enjoy murdering them both. "I hold notes signed by Altiers and secured by the Four Y ranch and cattle. Back interest hasn't been met and the paper is long overdue. So three days ago I came here to collect.

"Altiers told me he was going to marry into the wealthy Bar Nine outfit, so would have plenty of jack later. But when I clamped right down he promised to make a substantial cash payment.

"This he did last night at midnight. Handed me approximately nine thousand dollars and requested me to take myself elsewhere at once. But a half-mile from the Four Y I met this queer-acting cowpoke," nodding in the direction of Henry Stevens, "who asked me to stick around with him, and I did. Here's the cash, Miss McLeod. We all realize where Gusty George Altiers got it. In fact, Henry watched him while he tapped your father's safe."

Wordlessly the bewildered girl took the fat wallet Desmond pressed into her hands. She heard Henry Stevens saying gently:

"Sorry you had to go through all this, Mary. But Desmond and I just had to wait till you came to the Four Y, as we hoped and figured you would, afore we jumped on the thief. This so you'd get the deal plumb straight through your own eyes. . . . Desmond, you might take Gusty to town and finish your business with him."

Slipping a ring from her finger and tossing it to Altiers, Mary spoke to Desmond, "Yes, please take him away at once. I never want to see him again."

"You never will," promised Desmond. "But I'll be your new neighbor, for I'll have to take over this Four Y ranch."

Presently Gusty and Clyde Desmond were riding away together, with Mary McLeod and Henry Stevens watching until they passed from sight.

"I s'pose you hate me, Mary?" Henry broke the silence. "Someways I've enjoyed this job; someways it's been tough."

"What job?" flashed the girl, her eyes hot and bright. "It's high time you explained. First, why'd you pretend to be such a lazy, worthless, ornery—"

"I'll admit I was honin' to snag your interest," Henry broke in.

"Which you did, you—you likeable faker! Why did Daddy hire you?"

Henry drew a deep breath. "I hate explanations. Howsoever Tom McLeod hadn't no use for Altiers and allowed he must be worse off than plumb busted, the way he was runnin' his spread. So, figuring he had a right to check up on Gusty, your Dad hunted up the man who was backin' him, Clyde Desmond.

"Desmond was right well acquainted with me, and the three of us ribbed up the scheme: Desmond to crowd Altiers for his jack; McLeod to leave his ranch wide open for a robbery; me to be sort of the lookout.

"'Twas on my own hook that I allowed my bein' fired would leave the gate even wider open for a steal which Altiers might figure he could tie onto the absent, worthless, ornery chore man.

"Well honey, you just wouldn't can me. But it all worked out hunky when Gusty went with me after firewood and offered me a fat bribe to drift along in the night and keep driftin'. This showed what he was contemplatin'. I took his jack and pretended to ride out. I stack up tolerable good as a pretender, Mary.

"Now, as your Dad had allowed might be the case, Altiers cracked up when hard pressed for dough, showin' he wasn't the man for Mary McLeod to marry. Still mad with me, you provocative little witch?"

With a smile on her lips that lighted her eyes, Mary McLeod reached up to the man's breast pocket. She drew out his makin's, deftly rolled a neat cigarette.

"Smoke, Henry?"

"Thanks, Mary." Henry took the proffered cigarette in his left hand. For his right hand and his entire right arm were otherwise filled and occupied.

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Jinny Comes Home

By Eric Howard

Shadows out of the past laid cold fingers on Old Man Pell's conscience until two youngsters, brave and enchanted, brought the sunlight of truth to him.

LON REYNOLDS was the first man to see Jinny Lane when she got off the stage at Buckeye, after a fifty-mile journey across hot, dusty alkali flats. He was opening the door of the stage, as a matter of fact, expecting to meet his boss's wife, who had been in Denver for a month. It certainly surprised him to see, instead of buxom, motherly, gray-haired Mrs. Pell, this young and smiling girl.

Lon had his speech of welcome all fixed. He was going to say, "Welcome home, Miz Pell. We all sure missed you. The old man sent me in on account he had to go—"

He got as far as "Welcome, home" before he realized that the girl was a stranger.

"Oh, thank you," she said, with a little laugh.

"Gosh, miss," Lon stammered, "I was expectin' the boss's wife. I didn't mean—"

"Well, it is home, I guess," the girl

said. "And it's nice to be welcomed, even if it was all a mistake."

"No, it wasn't that, either," Lon protested. "I sure do welcome you."

"Hey, Lon," the stage-driver said, "Miz Pell sent word she was stayin' a while in Cedar City, on account one of her sister's young 'uns is sick."

"Oh," said Lon, and helped Jinny Lane down from the stage.

The astonishing thing about her was how clean and fresh she looked after that desert ride. She had light brown hair that curled down beside her pretty cheeks; her eyes were blue and she wore a blue dress, with a tan coat over it. She came only to Lon's shoulder as she stood beside him.

He was about to say he'd be glad to help her find her folks or see that she got home—he didn't know who she was—when a man pushed his way through the little crowd before the post-office, thrust Lon aside and put his arms around her.

"Hello, Jinny," he said. "Glad to see you. If you want to go right out to the ranch, I got my team over here."

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Of course, Tobe," she said. "My, I'm glad to be home!"

Lon's lips tightened, his eyes grew cold. Of all the people in Buckeye, in the whole country, the one he had the least use for was Tobe Harris. And it had to be Tobe who met this girl and welcomed her home. As Tobe took her arm and led her through the crowd, some of his friends touched their hats and murmured greetings.

The girl glanced at Lon over her shoulder and smiled. She seemed to think his confusion over seeing her when he expected Mrs. Pell was funny. But Lon was staring at Tobe Harris's broad back. The girl seemed to catch the meaning of his gaze and looked puzzled, then almost frightened.

Tobe had a firm grip on her elbow. He moved her quickly past the post-office and down the street to where he had hitched his team. He called to one of the men he knew, ordering him to bring the girl's things.

All this Lon took in with a sense of misgiving. Tobe Harris and his father, Terry, were a pair of crooks. The only reason they hadn't been locked up was that they were too clever and cunning. They had won against the law a half-dozen times. And this girl—well, there was something about her. She shouldn't have anything to do with their kind. She shouldn't be going out there to the Harris spread, a remote ranch up near the mountains. And she had called it home. Lon frowned.

The old stage-driver climbed down and stood beside Lon.

"Know that gal, Lon? She's Bill Lane's youngest. When Bill got shot, that last time he was runnin' for sheriff, she was a little gal. Her folks took her away and she's been with her oldest sister and her fam'ly. Why in time they let her come back—"

"What's Harris to her?" Lon asked.

The stage-driver spat into the dust. "Reckon Terry Harris is one of the few men who ever fooled Bill Lane. Don't know jest how, but Bill trusted him, let him run the outfit for him."

"You mean the Harris ranch?"

"Tain't the Harris ranch. It's the Lane ranch—the Lazy L. Harris was runnin' it for Bill 'fore he died. Been runnin' it ever since and more'n likely robbin' 'em blind. I dunno why this Jinny gal is here. Mebbe to look into things and see why the ranch don't pay."

"Jinny? Is that her name?"

"That's what they call her. Virginia, I reckon it is."

Lon built a cigarette and walked down the street to the buckboard he had driven in from the ranch. He fished a list the old man had given him out of a shirt pocket and went toward the general store to buy provisions.

Tobe Harris's team and spring wagon were right there in front of the store. The girl was sitting on the wagon seat, but Tobe wasn't around. She gave Lon another friendly smile as he neared her

and he touched his hat. Then he halted and turned back.

"Miss Lane," he said, "I'm Lon Reynolds of the Circle Star outfit, Old Man Pell's spread. The boss sure thought a heap of your father and he'd be proud if you'd come on over and see us, some time. If you're goin' to be on the Lazy L long, that is."

She smiled again. "Thank you. I remember Mr. Pell. Tell him I'll be over soon. I don't know just how long I'll stay—quite a while, maybe."

"Hello, Reynolds," said a man behind Lon.

He turned and faced Tobe Harris. It was like Tobe to mask his enmity—he knew Lon hated him, and he hated Lon—with apparent friendliness.

"How are you, Harris?" Lon murmured, touched his hat, and walked into the store.

As he was toting a sack of flour out to the buckboard, a man entered and said to the storekeeper, "Can you direct me out to the Harris ranch?"

When Lon re-entered the store, he sized up the newcomer. He had seen his saddle horse outside. It carried a strange brand on its flank. The man was heavy-set, heavy-featured, with a two days' growth of dark stubble on his face. Lon would have said that he wasn't used to riding and he had ridden a long way.

"Lon," the storekeeper said, "this gent wants to go out to Harris's. Tobe has pulled out, ain't he? I told him mebbe you'd take him as far as the fork, and show him the road."

"Sure," said Lon.

"I'd be obliged," said the stranger and gave Lon a broken-toothed smile.

They shook hands. The stranger gave his name as Luke Botts.

Lon hoisted a box of supplies to his shoulder. "If you're ready—"

The stranger tied his horse to the buckboard, climbed up beside Lon. He was talkative, but he didn't supply any information about himself or his reason for wanting to see Harris. Lon asked no questions, replied to the other man's questions and comments with a few words.

After a time, when the conversation dragged, Lon said casually, "Miss Jinny Lane, daughter to Bill Lane that used to be sheriff, got here today and went out to the Lazy L. I hear she owns it, not Harris."

The man beside him looked startled. "*She* owns it?" he asked.

"I dunno. Just what I heard. Heired it from her father, they say. Harris used to run it for him and he's kept on since Bill was shot."

Botts began to ask a lot of questions about Harris.

"I dunno," Lon replied to all of them. "We don't have much to do with the Lazy L people. Don't even work round-up with 'em. The old man, Jim Pell, don't get on with Terry Harris. They leave each other be."

They came to the fork in the road. One way led to the Circle Star and a number of other ranches. The other went to the Lazy L.

"Here you are," Lon said. "Foller that road and it'll take yuh right up to the Lazy L ranch house. Can't miss it."

"Thanks," said Adams. "Be seein' you again."

"Sure," Lon said evenly. To himself he said: "Mebbe—if Harris don't run you out fast. I dunno why you're here, feller, but it looks like you're goin' to try to get somethin' out of Harris. Others have tried, but they ain't tryin' any more."

S LON drove up to the Circle Star house, Old Man Pell boomed at him: "Hey, where's Ma? Did you forget her, you lummox?"

"Hold it, boss," Lon grinned. "She's stayin' in Cedar City. One of your little nieces or nephews is sick."

"My gosh, she'd oughta come home! They's always sick. If it ain't measles, it's whoopin' cough. And if it ain't

whoopin' cough, it's the pip. How's she expect me to get along?"

"Here's a letter from her. Mebbe she gives you complete directions on what to do and how to do it."

"I don't need no directions!" the boss bellowed. Then he grinned sheepishly and reached for the letter.

He read it slowly, then said, "Lon, listen to what she writes here: 'Jinny Lane, Bill's youngest girl, was here. She's going on to the Lazy L to try to find out why the ranch doesn't pay. I tried to get her to change her mind, send some man instead, but she's stubborn. I did all I could, except come right out and say what I thought of Terry and Tobe Harris. Now, Jim, it's up to you to see nothing happens to that girl. She's a sweet child. If I was home, I'd get her to stay with us. I don't like her being at the Lazy L. But you watch out for her till I get there. Then I'll try to bring her over.' What do you know about that, Lon?"

"Yeah," Lon said. "I met her. Tobe Harris took her out. I invited her to come over and see us. She said she would. Say, boss, there was a feller named Luke Botts—"

He stopped abruptly, staring at Pell. The old man had a wild look in his eyes. He was crushing his wife's letter in one hand, leaning on the porch rail with the other. He had turned pale and his lips were dry.

"Botts?" he whispered. "What's he look like, Lon?"

Lon described the man.

"I thought he was dead!" Pell groaned, turned and started into the house.

"No, he ain't dead, not by a long shot. What's up, boss?"

Pell feebly waved his hand, dismissing Lon, and went into his little office, at one end of the long porch. Lon looked after him, puzzled. What had come over the old man? He looked scared, and Lon had never known him to show fear before. He wished he could get things straightened out. That girl going out to the Harris place, where she didn't belong, probably not knowing how bad the Harrises were. That man Botts. And now the boss.

"Heck!" he said. "Miz Pell is dead right. Jinny Lane should've sent somebody else to investigate for her. And it's up to us to see nothin' happens to her. Only, I wish I knew what's what."

No use talking to the boss until he was ready to talk. Lon unharnessed his team and turned the horses into the corral. He did some other chores and worked up an appetite for supper.

"Lon!"

The boss was calling him from the house. Lon walked up. Pell had lost his pallor and his nervousness, but he had also put away half a pint of whiskey, which he seldom drank any more.

Lon followed him into the office. The boss gestured to a chair and Lon sat down.

"Got to tell you somethin', boy," Pell muttered. "Then you can decide whether you'll stick or leave. All I ask is you don't repeat what I tell you."

Lon nodded. "I'll stick, boss, no matter—"

"Wait till you hear. Mebbe you won't." Pell reached for the bottle and tilted it. He pushed it toward Lon. "I'm wanted for murder."

Lon jumped. An explosion of dynamite under his chair couldn't have surprised him more. He had known Jim Pell for years. He was the squarest man he knew. He was too stunned to speak.

"And Botts is here to get me—or else to bleed me for keepin' what he knows to himself."

Lon found his voice. "Who—who else knows, boss?"

"Terry Harris. Jest him and Botts, 'less Terry has told Tobe. That's what I got to tell you. It was me that got Bill Lane to take on Terry and make him boss of the Lazy L. I cut loose from the old gang—Botts was the boss, me and Terry run with him—and come up here. Me and Bill Lane got to be good friends. I did things for him, and he helped me out. He trusted me.

"I met Ma and settled down. Never

told her about this—killin'. Botts got shot up bad and sent to jail. Last I heard, he was crippled up, dyin'. But he's too ornery to die, I guess. After he went to jail, Terry come up here. Found out I was here and trailed me. I grubstaked him—had to. Bill was sheriffin' and couldn't run the Lazy L. Terry wanted that job. Bill wasn't sure of him, but I vouched for him. On my say-so, Bill took him on.

"I told Terry then I was through with him. I wouldn't do no more. And if he ever crossed Bill, I said, I'd get him. He reminded me of that killin'. But I didn't care. He said he had what he wanted—his hands on the Lazy L. Ever since, there's been a truce between us. We stay away from each other. Mebbe you've noticed. Now I've got to—"

Pell's voice faltered, but after a moment he went on.

"Then Bill was killed. He was shot by that outlaw, Ike Gibbons, sure. But who sent Ike after him? Terry? Mebbe. Ike died, too, a week later, from wounds Bill gave him. But did he? Mebbe he was shot so he'd never talk. And now this girl of Bill's is here, I've got to look out for her. Ma'd never forgive me if I didn't. Bill, either, if he knows. I've got to see they don't skin her, or worse. No matter what Luke Botts does to me."

"That killin', boss," Lon said. "It must've been a long time ago."

"Yeah, a long time. I played the fool, son. I ran away from the law. I should've stayed. I was about your age. We—well, we was stickin' up a feller. He wasn't much good, a loan-shark. He'd ruined a flock of ranchers. But that didn't concern us and I ain't makin' excuses. He had a lot of money in his office and that's what we wanted. He wasn't supposed to have a gun in there. Luke said he'd steal his gun, before the robbery. But he had a gun and he was waitin' for us. When he started blastin' away I shot him. I'd given out that I was already leavin'. Folks thought I'd left. I skinned out, fast. Botts and Terry Harris got the loan-shark's money.

"It was a long time 'fore I saw either of 'em. They didn't have any money left then and they figgered they didn't owe me any. Fact is, I owed them—for lettin' folks think I wasn't in on it. Lord, I wish Bill Lane was alive! It's true as Gospel, a man's sins will find him out.

"Now that Botts is here, I got to take a hand. I ain't afraid of Terry Harris or Tobe. But Botts, he's a devil, that one. This is goin' to be hard on Ma. I'm jest as glad she didn't come home. And, Lon, I need someone to back me up—if I can't make it alone."

Lon looked into his eyes for a moment. "Count me in, boss," he said. "Let's ride over there."

"No. Wait. Let me think. I jest wanted to know if you'd stand by me in case I needed you."

"You're durn right. I was thinkin' of takin' a hand on my own, 'cause I got no use for the Harrises and that girl—well, she's all Miz Pell said and I guess she don't know what she's gettin' into."

Pell nodded. "Let me think this out, Lon. Must be some way. . . ." He waved his hand and Lon left him. He wanted to do some thinking on his own.

HE WAS sorry for the boss. All the square years of his life, all the good things he had done, wouldn't count against that murder charge. Lon could understand the situation. Once, when he had been footloose and broke, he had almost joined up with Black Mack Sparr. If he had done that, there was no telling what he might have got into. He was lucky, that was all. He had landed a job and turned Black Mack down. He was even more sorry for Miz Pell. She'd suffer more than the boss, if this came out.

He thought about Luke Botts. The man had not impressed him very much, one way or another. But now he remembered his shrewd, small eyes, his way of talking without saying much.

Maybe Botts was as clever and as devilish as the boss said.

Most of all, he thought of Jinny Lane. Her folks should never have let her come here. But he had the idea that when Jinny made up her mind to do a thing, it got done. She was Bill Lane's daughter. But what did she hope to do at the Lazy L? Even if she found out the Harrises had been robbing her, what could she do about it? And what would they do if she accused them?

The cook whanged the triangle and Lon went in to supper. The old man sat at the head of the table, eating little, saying nothing. The other men talked and laughed, but seemed to sense, after a time, that the boss had something on his mind.

Lon was closest to Pell, much like a son to him. When the others had built their after-supper smokes and filed out, Pell gestured to Lon.

"Got an idea," he said. "We'll ride. I'll send you ahead with a note for Botts, askin' him to meet me tonight at the schoolhouse on the crick. He'll come, all right. You come back with him. Mebbe he'll want Tobe and Terry to trail along. All right. I'll have a talk with him."

"What about? What's the use of talkin'? If he's as bad as you say—"

"I know more about him than he knows about me," Pell said. "The express company and the bankers' association are still tryin' to get the man who did two big jobs. That's Botts. Reckon we can make a deal."

They rode off, after a time. Lon had the boss's note in his pocket. The schoolhouse, unused at this time of year, was nearer the Lazy L than the Pell ranch. They stopped there and Pell dismounted.

"I'll be waitin', Lon. Go ahead. And, listen, boy, I don't think you'll have any trouble, goin' as my messenger this way, but if they get hostile, you play it safe. Talk 'em down, bluff, but don't fight. They'll cut you down if you do."

"Sure," said Lon. "I'll jest give Botts your note and ask him to come back here to see you. What if he asks why you didn't come along?"

"Tell him I won't go near the Harris house. Got to meet him here in no man's land."

Lon kicked the ribs of his horse and galloped away. A smile crossed old Pell's face. He pulled out his watch. He'd give the boy a start and then he'd follow. He knew how Luke Botts's mind would work. Terry Harris would tell Botts that Lon was practically a son to Pell, going to be his heir. Botts would seize the boy, knowing he could use him to make Pell come to time. But he wouldn't expect Pell to follow up so soon.

Always, in the old days, he remembered, it had been Botts who had thought up the plans, the smart tricks. But he had learned from experience. He could do his own thinking. As he followed Lon, at a distance, he kept thinking back over those old days. He had been a young fool. He had known, all along, what Botts and Harris were; yet he had run with them, out of some mistaken notion that he'd find excitement and adventure.

He saw again, as he had seen so often, the thin, gray face of the man he had killed. Botts had assured him there would be no shooting. The loan-shark wouldn't be armed. He recalled the scene in the grimy little office. He had entered first, hand on the butt of his gun. Botts and Harris had crowded in after him, then moved quickly to either side. The loan-shark looked up.

"Jest a little committee out collectin'," Pell had said. "We'll take what you've got in that safe."

Surprisingly, the loan-shark's hand streaked to his gun on his desk. He fired twice. One bullet caught Pell in the leg. He started shooting without thinking. He remembered Botts's yell: "You killed him, you fool! Slope!"

Botts had never explained about the loan-shark's gun.

Well, that was all over. Now he had other things to think about.

EARING the Lazy L ranch house, Lon slowed down to a walk. He came to a gate and opened it, started to ride through. Then he heard a command.

"That's far enough," a voice said. "Who are you? What you want?"

Lon recognized Tobe Harris's voice. "How are you, Harris?" he said. "Got a message from the Old Man for that feller Botts that come here today."

"Who?" asked Tobe.

"Botts, Luke Botts—that's what he called himself, anyway."

"Nobody come here. Nobody called Botts or anything else. Swing down off that horse and walk up to the house, Reynolds. We want to hear more about this."

Lon saw the glint of light on Tobe's sixgun.

"Sure," he said. "I met this feller in town, after you pulled out. He wanted me to direct him to this place. And I did. He was ridin' a blue roan, carryin' a Texas brand."

"Never got here," Tobe said. "What's Pell got to do with him?"

Lon guessed Tobe was lying. He was dead sure Botts had arrived. But something had happened to him.

"I dunno," he said. "Reckon they're old friends."

Tobe grunted. At his command, Lon ground-reined his horse and walked into the house. Old Terry Harris was sitting beside a table. There was a smoky oil lamp on the table. No one else was in the room. When he saw Lon, his cold eyes peered at him intently.

Tobe began to explain why Lon had come.

"Don't know no Botts," old Terry growled. "This is one of Jim Pell's tricks. Tell the truth, feller! Why'd he send you over?"

"I got a note in my pocket for Luke Botts," Lon said. "Want to see it? And I sure saw Botts headin' this way. If he ain't here, mebbe he's out in the brush, waitin' to take a shot at you."

"Why would he want to do that?" Terry snapped. "Let's see that note."

Lon tossed it down on the table. Terry read it. His thin lips twisted and he cackled.

"Where's Miss Jinny?" Lon asked casually. "And how's she like her home ranch?"

"She's in her room and she likes it fine," Tobe said. "Yeah. Likes it so much she's goin' to stay—as my wife."

He smiled and Lon felt an impulse to drive his fist into his face. But he remembered what the boss had said. No fighting. He wanted to find out what had happened to Botts. He wanted to see Jinny, hear from her own lips that she was going to marry Tobe. He wondered how a girl could be so taken in. Tobe's meanness was written all over him, no matter how he tried to conceal it. And old Terry's face showed plainly the greed and evil that time had written there.

Lon forced himself to say, "Well, well. You're lucky, feller."

From another room he heard a faint sound, like the groan of a man in pain. Terry scraped his chair and snapped at Tobe, "Go see what—"

"Well, I'll be ridin' back," Lon announced, "to tell the boss his friend got lost."

Terry darted a suspicious glance at him and reached for a gun on the table as Tobe swung through a door.

"Jest wait a while, Reynolds," Terry said. "I want to get at what Pell's up to."

"Why, sure," Lon said. "But you don't have to hold a gun on me."

He sat down and built a cigarette. Tobe had gone into the other room and had closed the door. For a second Lon wondered if that groan could have come from Jinny's lips. No, it was a man—Botts, probably. He'd like to take a look at him, find out what they had done to him.

He heard another sound—a girl's stifled cry. Terry moved sideways, cursing. Lon kicked out with his foot, caught the old man on the wrist and

sent his gun flying. His own sixgun was in his hand, then, and Terry was cursing him violently.

Lon got Terry's gun, thrust it into his belt and moved toward the other door.

Terry yelled, "Look out, Tobe!"

The door was flung open and Jinny, not Tobe, ran out into the living-room.

"Oh!" she cried. "He's killing that man! Stop him, please!"

Lon thrust Terry's gun into the girl's hand.

"Watch the old buzzard!" he said, and sprang toward the door.

A shot checked him.

As he sprang to one side, he saw Tobe standing over Botts, who was writhing on the floor. There was blood beside him and he seemed to be in great pain. Tobe's face was contorted in rage as he watched the door. He was crouching, his gun gripped at his side.

"Your father is right in your line of fire," Lon said, "and Miss Jinny's holdin' him there. Drop your gun and come out, Tobe."

"Come and get me!"

Lon leaned against the wall. He peered through the crack at Tobe. He lifted his right foot, took off his boot. He kicked the door open and hurled the boot at Bob's head. Involuntarily, Tobe ducked as he fired. The bullet plowed into the floor at Lon's feet. He shot once, heard Tobe's gun hit the floor, and leaped into the room, swinging his gun.

A second later Tobe fell across Luke Botts and Lon knelt to lift him off the wounded man. Tobe was unconscious.

Botts whispered, "Kill the double-crossers! Kill 'em! I dunno who you are, but I'll—"

"Listen, Botts!" Lon pleaded. "I'm Jim Pell's friend. Jim Pell! Tell me about that loan-shark killin'! Tell me 'fore you go!"

Botts breathed noisily, tried to lift his head.

"I killed him. Pell missed him a mile. I shot the damned old crook. Wish I'd shot old Terry, 'stead of trustin' him."

A shudder passed over him and he was still. Lon pulled Tobe into the living-room. He glanced at Jinny. She was holding the gun on old Terry, who was crouched in his chair as though ready to spring, his cold eyes glinting hate.

She had courage and resolution, Lon thought. She was Sheriff Bill Lane's daughter. And Bill was the bravest man he had ever known.

But Jinny trembled and said, "I'm afraid I can't do this much longer, his eyes—like a snake's. I'm sure now he had Dad killed and—"

Lon moved toward her, took the gun from her hand.

"Steady," he said.

He noticed then that she held some papers in her other hand. She lifted them and put them on the table.

"I have proof here of how they robbed us, my sisters and me," she said. "That's what I came to find. For a year I've worked in a sheriff's office. He's taught me things. I came to find this.

"You see, they've kept two records, one for us, one for themselves. The ranch has paid ever since Dad died. But they've lied to us, written us letters explaining losses. When I said I was coming, Tobe wrote me, urging me to come. He began to—to write love letters, pretending he cared for me, hoping to make me believe. But I'm sure they had Dad killed!"

She burst into tears. Lon put his arm over her shoulders. She turned to him and sobbed. For a moment, as she seemed about to faint, Lon was off-guard.

"That man Botts came," she sobbed. "He threatened them, said he was here to collect. And they tortured him. The old man stabbed him."

"Yeah! Stabbed him!" Terry yelled, leaping at Lon.

He had drawn a knife from inside his shirt. He was lunging at Lon viciously. Protecting the girl, supporting her, Lon backed quickly. The knife came down, cut his arm.

There was a shot from the door and Terry's second lunge was never finished. His arm fell, he spun around, then crumpled.

Jim Pell was there, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Whew!" he said. "Looks like I let you in for a fight, son." He looked at Jinny for a long moment. "Your father was the best friend I ever had, girl, and I—I let him in for this. Vouched for Harris here, got your dad to trust him. My fault, all of it."

Jinny went to him, gently took his hand. "No, no," she protested. "I know what Dad thought of you, Jim Pell. He said you were the squarest, finest man he ever knew." She shuddered a little as she glanced at Terry Harris. "I—I'd like to get away from all this."

"Take her to our home, Lon," Pell said. "I'll stay and look after things. Send word in to the sheriff. Go on, boy."

Lon hesitated. The look on Jinny's face decided him.

"All right, boss," he nodded. "And that other thing. It was Botts, not you. He said so. You were rattled and shot wild. He did it."

For a second Pell's eyes cleared hopefully. Then he shook his head, said somberly: "That don't matter. I was there. I was in it."

"But that don't count," Lon urged, "against all the rest, all the good years. No, sir!"

He took Jinny's arm. "I'll take you over to the Circle Star. You'll like it over there. Miz Pell will be home soon and she'll want you to make us a long visit."

A MONTH later Jinny was still there. The Lazy L had been leased to a competent rancher of good reputation. Whenever Jinny mentioned leaving, Mrs. Pell thought up good reasons for her staying.

Late one afternoon Mrs. Pell went out on the porch and called, "Jinny!"

For a time there was no answer. Then two figures emerged from the shade of a tree and came toward the house, holding hands. They were both smiling and their faces were flushed. The girl's eyes were as bright as stars.

"Miz Pell," Lon said, "Jinny's promised to marry me."

"You don't say!" Mrs. Pell observed ironically. "Can't say I'm surprised. I knew when Jinny baked that chocolate cake you were a goner, Lon."

Jinny laughed.

"Aw, no," Lon protested. "It wasn't that!"

"Hustle in, Jinny, and stir up the gravy. You can win a man with cake, but it takes good brown gravy to hold him."

"I'd love Jinny if she couldn't cook anything!" Lon protested.

Jinny threw him a kiss.

"I reckon," said Mrs. Pell dryly, "but after seein' you eat it's just as well Jinny knows her way around a kitchen."

"That ain't exactly so, Ma," Old Man Pell said, coming out and putting his arm about Mrs. Pell's ample waist. "Wasn't your cooking what held me, but your faith in me all these years."

"Oh, pshaw," Ma Pell said. "You always did like to make out you was a old scoundrel. Don't you pester Jinny like that, Lon, after you git wedded."

But Lon didn't hear. He was in the kitchen telling Jinny she was much too good for him and Jinny was denying it vigorously.

In the Second December Number

Gun Judgment

By Arthur Hawthorne Carhart

A Novelette of Range Justice

Red McAllister Goes to Town

By Cole Kitson

The carnival offered more than pink pop and snake charmers to Red. There was a girl, strangely out of place, hauntingly familiar . . . and a brown devil of a man who styled himself "Swami."

WHEN Charley Bronson, foreman of the T Bar O ranch, gave Red McAllister leave to go to White Springs for the Old Settler's Celebration, it was with a parting admonition pointedly designed to curb his top hand's exuberance.

"Now, listen, Red! It's against my better judgment to let you do this, but since you got your mind set on it, I reckon there's no use arguin'. Howsomever, I'm plumb sick and tired of bailin' you outa jams! If you git into any sorta trouble this trip you kin keep right on goin'! Understand?"

Red understood. And he could see old Charley's point of view. But as he emerged from the wooden-awninged shade of the Mansion House hotel into White Spring's sun-drenched, bunting-draped streets, his tumultuous sense of well being held no element of premonitory uneasiness.

This was the last and biggest day of a week of *fiesta*, the occasion being the fiftieth anniversary of the town's

founding. For twenty-five of those years it had been little more than a water hole on a thirsty trail, with a reputation shadier than the grove of ancient cottonwoods that had marked its bubbling springs since the memory of living man.

But prosperity had come with the settling of the surrounding wilderness, the opening of mines and ranches and the arrival of a spur-line railway. White Springs, awakening to civic consciousness, was putting on a show to tell the world!

The T Bar O cowboy grinned happily as he mingled with the festive throng, shouting greetings to friends and acquaintances, and gazing with interest at unfamiliar sightseers whose garb and manner announced them as belonging to that strange breed known as "tourists."

Suddenly his grin widened as he beheld an old pal, Larry Collins, bearing down upon him through the swirling dust. Red had last seen Larry up in the Jackson's Hole country some two years previous; and Collins greeted him now with the identical words of his farewell then: "Let's have a drink!"

In ten minutes they'd caught up with their respective histories, Larry proudly displaying an official badge beneath a deputy sheriff's star.

"I'm on the side of the angels, now!" he admitted somewhat sheepishly. "Got sworn in last week. Mebbe I could git you on, Red. It's a dang sight softer'n punchin' cows!"

"Too soft for me!" Red shook his head. "Besides, there ain't enough future in it. Why, even rustlers is gettin' scarce in this country!"

"Rustlers mebbe, but other crime's flourishin'," Larry declared warmly. "Looka here!" He pulled a dog-eared "wanted" bill out of his pocket. "I'd shore like to git my mitts on that baby!" he said wistfully.

Red glanced with mild interest at the pictured visage of a scowling, lumpy-jawed individual, the list of whose misdeeds appeared to be extensive and one of whose several aliases was "Black Hunky."

"Looks plenty tough," he agreed.

"And is!" Larry said, feelingly. "They figger it was him got away with the Little Daisy payroll in that bank robbery up at Vegas. The mine officials is offerin' a cool thousand for him, and the bank five hundred."

"Well, when you ketch him I'll help you celebrate!" Red laughed as they made their way back to the hitch-rack. "What I'm headed for now is that carnival show I hear's in town. Whereabouts is it at?"

"Out at the Fair Grounds," Larry told him. "Aain't nothin' much to it but a bunch o' freaks."

But the carnival was a mecca for the merrymaking throngs and Red was never happier than when mingling with a crowd of folks—any kind of folks. Sometimes he wondered if his hankering for crowds and excitement was attributable to his birth and rearing in the great, lonely Cimarron country.

"I bet I'd be there yet," he thought wonderingly now. "if it hadn't of been for Susie Belle's pa!"

Ah, well! That was a chapter out of the past . . . definitely over. Four years made a lot of differenc. Susie Belle had been such a kid then, only fifteen. At twenty, Red had imagined himself a man; man enough, anyway, to provide a home for her as good as the one her hard-fisted old father provided.

But Si Blount had decreed otherwise. "No smart-aleck bush-popper that ain't dry behind the ears yit, kin court a gal of mine!" he'd snarled at their final interview. "Susie Belle ain't old enough to know her own mind, and even if she was, I do the decidin', in this family!"

Red tied his horse to one of the old cottonwoods outside the Fair Grounds and joined the crowd swarming into the noisy, dusty bedlam that was the carnival. It was a typical cow country trail show, the kind that traveled in

vans and wagons over weary wilderness miles, camping for a week or two at a time wherever the "pickin's" looked promising.

This was a sizable outfit, its tented attractions enclosing the old rodeo field to form a big, hollow square. In dreamy-eyed enjoyment the T Bar O cowboy moved around the square, stopping to gape with childlike awe at flaunting, gaudy banners announcing such marvels as living skeletons, bearded ladies and dog-faced boys, and thrilling to the melody and discord of hurdy-gurdy music, shouting barkers, crying babies and yapping curs.

Although he had lunched fulsomely at the Mansion House, he purchased a large and dripping barbecue sandwich and an intriguing confection of sparkling ruby hue which an insistent vendor described as a "strawberry all-day sucker." Thus fortified, Red proceeded on his preliminary inspection, not yet having decided which attraction to patronize first. And presently he found himself one of a preponderantly male group in front of a large tent emblazoned with the insignia of "Swami Singh, the Mystic Hindoo."

A fat, perspiring red-faced man in a seersucker suit was selling tickets at a small booth beside a raised platform whereon a large, chocolate-colored, turbaned gentleman, evidently the Swami himself, was energetically ballyhooing the charms of four heavily veiled but otherwise sparsely attired ladies seated on cushions beside him.

Red eyed the outfit for a moment or two with growing distaste. A red and yellow poster suspended from the platform proclaimed the Swami as not only the greatest Oriental Mystic of the Age, but also as a Mind-reader, a Crystal-gazer, a Hypnotist and a Fortune teller. Red didn't know what a Swami was and he'd never heard of crystal-gazing.

"Step right up, boys, and git a free eyeful of these here lovely houris before the show starts!" the Swami was intoning, in markedly unOriental accents. "Each and every one of these damsels is a talented artiste, ladies and gents, right from the harems of the richest potentates of the East! From the Golden Horn, from India's coral strand, from the palaces of Morocco, from Egypt on the Nile. . . ."

He waved his hand and the harem ladies rose and began swaying to the squeaky tones of a phonograph inside the tent.

Red was not pleased. Never critical of his fellowman and strong though the live-and-let-live spirit was in him today, there was something about the Hindoo hombre that definitely clouded his sunny mood. He was about to move on in disgust when something sailed through the air and fell at his feet with a tinkling clatter. One of the "houris" had dropped her tambourine.

There was a slight commotion as several grinning bystanders sought to pick it up. Red made no effort to do so—his hands being full of refreshments—but as somebody handed the gaudy trinket back to the girl his eyes met hers for an instant over the heads of the crowd and he realized, with a queer shock of astonishment, that she had been trying to attract his attention.

For a space of seconds he simply stared back at her; then someone pushed in front of him and he started to move away when the girl, rapping sharply on the tambourine, again pinioned his glance. There was poignant appeal in her eyes, an unmistakable urgency, tragic and intense.

Feeling bewildered and uncomfortable, Red backed out of the crowd; but the consciousness that the girl's eyes were following him caused him, against his will, to turn for another look at her.

He saw now that she was a slender little thing, evidently younger than the others, with long slim legs and a way of moving her graceful little head that reminded him of a young colt. Two heavy black braids hung beside the bangled nose veil that concealed

her features; he could not tell whether her eyes, heavily made up, were dark or blue.

Did she figure she knew him? In the past four years his travels had taken him over most of the vast cow country and, despite the scarcity of womenfolk in that man's territory, he'd managed to meet quite an array of personable young ladies. Far too many to recall them all, offhand.

Yet there was something about the girl that was vaguely familiar. Sometime, somewhere, he'd seen or known somebody. . . .

Suddenly Red's jaw dropped as a memory flashed in his mind—the memory of a young girl, slim and long-legged, racing across a grassy mountain pasture with the bounding grace of a thoroughbred colt.

Susie Belle! But it couldn't be! It was impossible! For one thing, Susie Belle's hair was short and the color of sun-drenched honey, curly and short, with little soft tendrils that curved around her forehead and the nape of her neck.

Red had backed into the shade of one of the old cottonwoods, and now he leaned against the big bole, feeling a little overcome with the heat or something. He must be loco, he told himself! What in the name of all that was holy, or otherwise, would Susie Belle Blount be doing with this ratty carnival outfit?

THE SWAMI was again haranguing the crowd to "step right up" for a look at the houris, "each and every one a famous artiste."

"Meet Princess Fatima!" he invited, with a leering grin, and a plump, beady-eyed woman stepped forward. "Show the gents a sample of your spec-ial-ity, beautiful one!" he urged, and Fatima oblinging performed a few wriggles. The crowd guffawed.

Red stood tense. He felt he couldn't stand it if the little dark-haired girl was to be forced to face the crowd, to be made a fool of, in this shameful fashion!

But now the Swami had laid a hand on her shrinking shoulder. "It gives me great pleasure, ladies and gents," he was saying, "to announce a special attraction in conection with our elegant and ree-fined exhibition! This, good people, is the Princess Suzanna, a wild Circassian beauty right fresh from the steppes of Afganistan! The Princes don't talk English yet, but she's got eyes that speak a language of their own, gents! She's a rope artiste, this little gal is! Learned the art among the herds of the great Arabian deserts. Come on, Princess! Don't be bashful! Show the ladies and gents—"

That was as much as Red heard. His eyes were blazing as he pushed his way toward the platform where the Swami, his too-familiar hand still gripping the girl's shoulder, was forcing her to the front. Just what his own intentions were at that moment, he was not at all sure; but whatever was uppermost in the turmoil of his mind, his move was promptly frustrated by the perspiring man in the seersucker suit. Planting himself firmly in front of the cowboy he uttered the single word, "Scram!"

It was only as his fist shot out, connecting with the fat man's face, that Red realized that throughout the past crowded moments he had been clutching his barbecue sandwich. The all-day sucker had disappeared, but the sandwich was now plastered over most of the ticket-seller's steaming countenance!

But Red did not tarry to enjoy the effect, which must have been good, judging by the mirthful howls of the crowd; he had leaped onto the platform and now, unencumbered by food, he swung at the goggling visage of the Swami.

The satisfying smack of his fist against that chocolate pulp was the only detail of the ensuing mêlée that was afterwards quite clear to him. The

ticket-seller, frantically clawing assorted condiments out of his eyes, had backed into the platform, throwing his bulk against one of the insecure supports with such force that the structure collapsed, hurling Red, the Swami and the shrieking girls in a scrambled heap among the milling crowd.

Somebody's hard head caught Red in the stomach as he went down, knocking the wind out of him. When next he was aware of anything he found himself crawling through what appeared to be a forest of writhing legs and groggily conscious that, things being as they were, his best bet was to keep right on moving.

How he managed to reach his horse, and, more amazing still, how he had escaped being gathered up by the constabulary, were matters he could only ponder over, with vague thankfulness, as he made his dazed way back to town.

For a time, after he had reached his room and had started on the repairs necessary to make himself presentable for the evening, that feeling of content remained with him. But, in spite of his determination to forget the crazy incident, he couldn't forget that girl's tragic eyes. Try as he would to argue that it was no business of his if she was in trouble of some sort, that probably he'd imagined that she had tried to attract his attention, and, even if she had, that her motive had doubtless been questionable, there was no getting away from the fact that she reminded him of Susie Belle.

He was a fool to keep thinking about it, he told himself resentfully. The evening was before him, the big evening he'd come to town for, and, by heck! he wasn't going to have it ruined by the fancied resemblance of a crumby little hoochy-coochy dancer to a golden-haired girl who, for the better part of four years, had been merely a fragrant, fading memory in the secret places of his heart.

No! He wasn't going to be that kind of a fool! Yet it wasn't long, after he'd met Larry Collins for their prearranged tour of White Springs' varied entertainments, that he found himself telling the deputy about his experience at the carnival.

"If the kid hadn't looked so much like a girl I knew back home, I wouldn't think nuthin' more of it," he confided, worriedly; and then because some further explanation seemed to be called for, he went on to describe Susie Belle and her pious old martinet of a father, who, even in a woman-hungry land, managed to keep his family of pretty daughters in such rigorous seclusion that they were in danger of becoming old maids.

Larry was immediately interested. "Let's go out there and take a look-see!" he suggested, "We got plenty of time."

SO PRESENTLY they were hitching their horses outside the grove where the gypsy-like show people had their encampment. The place was dotted with makeshift tents beside big vans and carry-all wagons, and the gleam of cooking fires punctured the dusty, noisy dark. The air was heavy with the smell of mules and horses in an old brush corral outside the grove. Performers from the various shows crowded around lunch wagons and cook tents, snatching hurried meals before the evening rush set in on the near-by lot.

The appearance of the two outsiders was greeted by hostile stares and silence, but Larry's badge was conspicuous and on his inquiry as to who was in charge of the camp, they were directed to a van bearing the painted likeness of a massive lady entwined with reptiles. The legend underneath anounced, simply: "Madame Hortense —The World's Greatest Snake Charmer."

The Madame herself appeared on the steps of her van as the two young men approached. She was dressed in a short, spangled skirt of pink satin and a dirty white sweater. A yellow rag bound

around her greasy locks gave her a piratical look.

"What'cha want?" she queried gruffly.

Red flashed his star. "I'm makin' an inspection," he told her. "You the boss of this outfit?"

She nodded. "I represent the shows," she admitted, in a more amiable tone, "Arrange the bookin's, and so on."

"What about this Hindoo fortune teller? He been with your outfit long?" Larry asked.

She gave him an odd, quick glance. "If he's a Hindoo, I'm a Chinaman!" she said, with a shrug. "They joined us up in Colorado, I forgit just where. Why?"

"Whereabouts are they camped?"

She pointed toward the shadowy outskirts of the grove. "They ain't very folksy," she said dryly. "Like to be off by theirselves. And that suits us fine!"

"I take it they ain't very popular," Larry grinned.

"No, and I don't know nothin' about 'em," Madame Hortense said, with finality. "If you'll excuse me, I got sausages fryin'."

"Well, we didn't git much outa her, did we?" Red said, as they made their way toward the Swami's secluded camp spot. He was beginning to feel a little foolish over this quixotic expedition; surer every moment that Susie Belle, or even a girl who by any stretch of the imagination might be likened to Susie Belle, would never be found in such surroundings.

"Looks like we won't git much outa this, either," Larry was saying. "Looks like there's nobody home!"

Even in the darkness, however, the Hindoo's vans—there were two of them, and a wagon—were obviously newer and gaudier than the other outfits.

"Must be a hell of a life!" the deputy remarked as they circled around the dark, locked vans. "Let's go on over and take in the show."

Something of Red's earlier enchantment returned as they entered the Fair Grounds, now a blaze of acetylene gas light, and, if anything, a noisier and more splendid confusion than in the afternoon.

"Look out for a row if the ticket guy recognizes me!" he warned Larry as they approached the Swami's concession. "We may have some trouble gittin' in!"

But the fat man, his wilted seersucker suit bearing unmistakable evidence of the afternoon's misadventure, was so busy short-changing a rush of customers that Red, hard on Larry's heels, got by him before he could make a move. But from the look that flared for an instant in the man's piggish little eyes, the cowboy knew that the anticipated trouble had not been evaded, merely postponed.

The prospect was not unpleasing. Convinced now that his ridiculous apprehensions regarding the girl had no foundation, he was really beginning to enjoy himself; and if finishing the job of cleaning up the Swami's outfit was to be forced upon him, why that, from an entertainment standpoint would be just so much velvet!

The show was already under way when they pushed into the crowded tent. Poised against a black velvet backdrop, the Swami was just concluding a conjuring act. This was followed by a little number from the Oriental ladies which brought forth approving stamps and cheers from the audience—except from Red. Red was feeling uneasy again. The little houri with the long dark braids was not on the stage. And now the Swami was calling for volunteers for his hypnotic exhibition.

Larry didn't want to leave. "Let's go up there and get a good look at the guy!" he urged. "I always did wantta know if there was anything in this hypnotism stuff!

He grabbed the protesting cowboy's arm and, together with several other sheepishly grinning volunteers, they mounted the ramp to the stage. It happened before Red realized what he was

doing, and it was too late to back out; but when the Swami, rapidly selecting four likely victims, gave him a malevolent glance of recognition, he began to think that maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all!

A thrill of pure joy tingled through him as he noted that one of the mystery man's magnetic orbs was haloed by a truly magnificent shiner; a thing of beauty which no amount of chocolate grease-paint could conceal.

But not for a moment did it occur to him that the so-called Hindoo might really possess hypnotic powers. And when two of the volunteers began showing signs of succumbing to the man's sinister abracadabra Red thought their imbecilic antics were faked. But when Larry, the erstwhile level-headed and completely sane Larry, started slapping wildly at an imaginary scorpion which the Swami insisted was crawling down his neck, the cowboy's scalp stirred with a sharp sense of alarm.

Good gosh! Was Larry really in the man's power? Somewhere he'd read that only a willing subject could be hypnotized. Larry had been willing enough—but great jumpin' catfish!

Bracing his legs and doubling up his fists, Red stood tensed as the Swami's gloating face moved close to his. Involuntarily he stepped backward . . . back and back as the man's outspread fingers, like hungry talons, reached for him. The black curtain behind him bulged suddenly as he reared into it, and at the same instant the lights went out. Something that felt like a ton of brick hit him in the back of the head and he went down like a slugged steer.

DAWN broke with soft radiance over the now quiet town of White Springs, gilding with benign impartiality the steeples of its two small churches and the gaudy clapboard false fronts of its nine saloons. It sent a wave of sparkling sunlight through the murmuring leaves of the old cottonwoods out at the Fair Grounds, glinting warmly on the red head of a range knight whose dishevelled appearance and posture suggested that he had been dumped there, along with a welter of other rubbish, by the departed carnival.

As Red's eyes blinked open at the sun's caress, he was conscious only of an aching soreness which seemed to pervade every muscle of his body. Then gradually, painfully, he became aware that he was lying in an exceedingly cramped position on what appeared to be a heap of tin cans.

Pulling himself upright he gazed around in utter bewilderment. He felt of his face, his head. Besides aching like all get out, the top of his head was sticky. And there was a good deal of blood on his shirt. He must have met with an accident, a ridin' accident . . . but why in the name of reason had he been left here?

Suddenly a startling thought struck him. Maybe—maybe this was Heaven! The vast sunlight peace of the grove suggested celestial regions. Then his eyes took in the rubbish and refuse, scattered papers, broken bottles and tin cans, comforting evidence of recent mundane occupation.

The carnival! Larry . . . the Swami's show . . . that blow from behind the curtain! In appalling flashes that seemed to split his head wide open the events of the night came crowding back.

"Well, I'll be everlastingly blowed!" he muttered. And staggered to his feet. Then he was stumbling dizzily out of the grove to the spot where he had left his horse.

The hungry animal eyed him reproachfully as he unhitched it. Larry's horse was gone. Astounded resentment surged through Red. Larry had gone back to town without even bothering to find out what had happened to him!

Main Street was empty save for a

dozen or so tired horses tethered in front of saloons, and a few inebriated revelers slumbering peacefully on the sidewalks. The big celebration was over, past history, and he'd spent the best hours of it knocked cold!

It wasn't until after he got back to his hotel room and began to take stock of the situation, that he discovered that his watch, small change and wallet were missing. Fortunately he'd left most of his money with the hotel clerk, but the loss of the wallet, with Susie Belle's picture, was a catastrophe!

Well, the damned Hindoo sure had had the last laugh! Or thought he'd had! Furiously angry now, coldly clear-headed again, Red washed up, grabbed a cup of coffee in the lunch room and strode out of the hotel to look for Larry Collins.

They met midway of Main Street, Larry being then on his way back from the Fair Grounds where he had gone belatedly searching for Red.

"What the hell?" they exclaimed in unison.

It took a few moments to get their incoherent explanations unscrambled.

"That son-of-a-seacook put me out!" Larry swore, indignantly. "Honest to gosh, Red, when I come to, at daylight, I was settin' on the stoop of the Chink's boardin' house with the damndest splittin' headache I ever had in my life! Don't remember a thing about what happened after we got up there on that platform!"

Red exhibited the gash in his head.

"They tried to do me in!" he said grimly. "There's somethin' damn queer about this business, Collins! And I ain't lettin' the grass grow under my feet!"

"Me neither! The outfit can't be very far out on the road! Come on!"

Red had left his horse at a livery corral, and they hurried there first. Then Larry had to leave a message at the sheriff's office and afterwards they repaired to a drugstore for a couple of headache powders. The sun was well up before they got away from town, and, though they lost no time picking up the caravan's trail, it was close to one o'clock before they sighted the first of the crawling train of vans.

The main part of the caravan had stopped for the noon halt in the shade of some big trees where the road wound into Sycamore Canyon. Failing to find the Swami's outfit with the bunch, they hurried to the van of Madame Hortense, who, greeting them as old friends, informed them chattily that the Hindoo hadn't left White Springs with the caravan.

"I didn't find it out myself till we was well along the way," Madame admitted. "Usually I check noses when we break camp, but there was a lot of mess and excitement gettin' away last night, and I just didn't miss 'em until Mr. Sweeney called my attention to it."

Mr. Sweeney, the living skeleton, and a number of the other troupers, had gathered around the strangers, agog with interest. Mr. Sweeney gave it as his considered opinion that there was "something fishy" about the so-called Swami.

"I told Hortense so, the day they joined up with us, didn't I, Hortense?" he said. "'I bet the nearest he ever was to show business before,' I sez, 'was a fortune-teller's tent on the Coney Island Pike,' I sez."

"We all gotta start some time," Madame reminded him tolerantly, and added, turning to Red: "Mr. Sweeney comes of a long line of livin' skeletons."

"I can believe that!" the cowboy murmured politely,

"But, listen! We wanta find out—"

"The feller they called Pinky quit their show last night," interrupted the man in charge of the commissary. "Leastways," the man added, "I seen him streakin' across the lot, carryin' a suitcase, while we was breakin' camp."

This was news to Madame Hortense. "He handled tickets for the Swami," she explained to Red and Larry, "One of the girls in the troupe was his wife."

"Which one?" Red asked quickly.

"Not—not the one with long black braids?"

The snake charmer grinned. "No," she said, "I know the one you mean, though. She was a little rodeo performer they picked up in Vegas."

"Vegas?" the two men exclaimed, and looked at each other. But Red was thinking that Vegas was on the edge of the Cimarron country; and Larry was remembering the Little Daisy payroll robbery.

Larry said, "How long since you all were in Vegas?"

"You say they picked her up there?" Red was saying, "How come—"

"I don't know nothin' about it," Madame interrupted, "'ceptin' that Mabel, she's the Swami's wife, told me that the kid was broke and they offered her a job with the show. I never seen much of her. Pretty little blond thing, she was!"

"Blond?" Red fairly shouted. "You mean—"

"Why, shore! She was a blond!" Madame grinned. "That black wig was just scenery. Guess she musta liked it better'n her own hair. I never seen her without it, after the first day."

"Say! I just happend to think of somethin'!" the commissary man exclaimed. "Two-three days ago the Hindoo and Pinky stopped at the wagon for a cup of mud, and Pinky was askin' about some of the Border towns. You reckon they headed south?"

Again Red and the deputy exchanged glances. "You recollect if they mentioned any town in particular?" Larry questioned, trying to be enormously casual.

"No, but I do recall the Hindoo askin' if I knowed if they was a road through Black Canyon. I remember that, on account I told him there was only one place to ford the river after you git in that Black Bluff country."

"Well, thanks folks. We'll be seein' you!" the deputy said, and wheeled his horse around to follow Red.

The cowboy's face was set in a cast of harsh emotion as they rode silently out of the leafy canyon.

"Guess we better hit for town and git fresh horses," Larry suggested. "Mebbe we could pick up their trail outa the grove. Git a idea which way they headed."

Red shook his head. He knew the White Springs country better than did Collins, who was a comparative newcomer. A maze of criss-crossing tracks and trails radiated from the town, some leading to distant ranches, some mere cattle trails, but most of them petering out in the sandy, wind-blown wastes of the encompassing desert.

"They headed south, all right!" Red said, with grim conviction. "That old Black Canyon trail joins up with the San Marcial cut-off. We'll save time by crossin' over to Mel Todd's place at the edge of the Bluffs. We can make it by sundown."

It was after dark, however, before the weary pair reached Todd's old Horseshoe Ranch. They found the place deserted save for an old Mexican left to care for the stock. Todd and his two cowhands had gone to White Springs for the celebration, he told them; but he put up their tired horses and shared his pot of frijoles with them, and soon they were sound asleep on their absent host's straw mattresses.

UP BEFORE daylight, Red and Larry were well into the Bluff country when the sun rose. They had left the main traveled southwest road a few miles below Todd's ranch house, Red plotting the course to pick up the Black Canyon trail where it left the long slopes of the Fresnillas foot-hills to descend through a series of water-scoured gulches to the great arid plans of the upper Big Bend.

With the best of luck, he figured, the Swami's caravan couldn't have proceeded much beyond that point; and, from there on, its progress, if any,

must be at a snail's pace. Only a reckless tenderfoot or a desperate fugitive would attempt the abandoned Black Canyon cut-off with heavy wagons.

As they penetrated deeper into the God-forsaken wilderness Larry began to express doubts that any man would be fool enough to try it. "Looks to me like we'll be lucky to find our own way out of here, let along pick up a trail!" he complained.

The so-called "bluffs," really badlands, pleated and crumbled into a bewildering maze, would have baffled the most confident guide; and Red was far from confident. But his sense of direction was keen, he knew approximately where he was heading and he was grimly determined to find the old road, if only, as now seemed probable, because it offered their one chance of getting back to civilization.

Keeping these reflections to himself, he led the way in as near a beeline as horseflesh could negotiate through a land that was never made for man or beast. They went through gulches hacked out of the raw earth by cataclysmic storm waters; up slopes clad here with thorn-brush and cacti, elsewhere so steep and rocky that no vegetation could find foot-hold; over the broken backs of scarred limestone ridges; and finally, as the sun dropped low in the cloudless sky, into a narrow valley dotted with scrub brush and with a faint ribbon of wheel tracks winding across its pitted surface.

"Look!" Red exclaimed.

Larry was already staring, goggle-eyed, at the object standing out in the clear light on the valley floor.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he breathed. "It's one of their wagons!"

They had left it, all neatly loaded, with the equipment for the show; gaudy big tent, poles, benches . . . an amazing assortment of knock-down paraphernalia, heaped high but skillfully and securely roped.

The two young men said not a word as they circled the abandoned wagon and then moved into the now distinct tracks leading on into Black Canyon. For one thing, they were too tired to speak even if they could have found words, right then, to express their mingled emotions. In Red's case the triumphant discovery was overshadowed by growing apprehension.

Galloping out of the valley, they found themselves on a mesa-like slope where the remnants of a road descended steeply to a crumbling break in the great escarpment. The light was rapidly fading now, blue shadows rising like mist from the network of canyons below, and only the rock-strewn slope catching the last golden rays of the dipping sun.

For a moment the rims of the cliff were bathed in crimson fire; a glow that flashed and shimmered on the red and gilt embellishments of an overturned van, balanced precariously on the edge of the drop, grotesque and starkly incongruous in that wild setting.

Red, riding well ahead, saw it first. With a yell he wheeled his horse down the slope and was out of his saddle before Larry, pounding along behind, saw him leave the road. Dragging his horse to a scrambling halt, the bewildered deputy sat staring down among the shadowy rocks, unable at first to see what had caused the cowboy's excited shout.

Red was yelling in earnest now as he frantically battered at the door of the tipped-over van. When Larry got there the locked door was a splintered wreck, Red ripping through its jagged splinters with bare, bleeding hands and behaving altogether like a crazy man.

The next moment Red was crawling out through the shattered door, half dragging, half carrying, a sobbing, yellow-haired girl.

"Susie Belle! It's Susie Belle!" he gasped, and, for the next few moments, Larry had to be satisfied with that.

But presently the girl and Red were calm enough to notice that he was there; and then it was Susie Belle, still trembling but rapidly getting a grip on

herself, who was the calmest of the three as she told them how she had run away from home; reached Vegas hoping to win some prize money at the annual rodeo, and, failing in that, had fled from town with the carnival.

By the merest chance she had stumbled upon the Peters' van a few moments after Peters—the Swami—and Pinky had returned there after robbing the bank. Believing she had overheard their excited talk, they had dragged her into the van and from then on had held her prisoner. The climax of weeks of terror had come when she recognized Red in the White Springs crowd.

"It was so awful!" she sobbed, clinging to Red, "I was tied up and gagged and didn't know what was happening, except that we were traveling again. But they'd threatened to kill me if I talked, and I knew they'd get rid of me as soon as they could! Oh, Red, when that terrible crash came, and I realized they'd tried to hurl me over the cliff, left me here to die. . . ."

Larry, grim-faced, was swinging into his saddle.

"I'm catchin' that black-hearted swine if it's last thing I ever do!" he said.

BUT BLACK CANYON had already trapped the fugitives. Halted by an impassable barrier of rocks and drift brush, they were a desperate and badly frightened crew as, at dusk, they huddled around a small cooking fire in the washed-out road.

The Swami, alias "Black Hunky Peters," had just informed the terrified women that he was going on without them, riding one of the mules. Mabel was tearfully pleading against this move, and they were all making so much noise that when a voice from the shadows ordered: "Stick 'em up, folks! You're surrounded!" the effect was much as though a bomb had exploded among them. . . .

Grinning over it afterwards, Red and Larry declared that the actual capture of the flabbergasted "Hunky" was so tame as to be hardly worth recounting. As for the women, it seemed almost that they welcomed this finale to a situation that had become more hazardous, for them, than anything the avenging Law was likely to do to them.

In fact, in her dazed relief, Mabel Peters babbled information that was to lead later to the capture of Pinky and the recovery of most of the Little Daisy payroll. With the erstwhile "Swami" securely roped and the make-up wiped off his face, and destined to be a negligible factor in her life for some time to come, Mabel got a good deal off her chest. . . .

For the deputy and the cowboy, the real excitement came after they'd holstered their sixguns. Getting the locked van and its load of crooks backed around and out of the canyon was the most perilous and nerve-racking part of the whole experience, and when, at daylight, they found themselves safe on the old road, their triumphant relief was too great for words.

Larry rode alongside the van on that strange expedition back to town. Now and then he glanced at the happy pair in the driver's seat, and a twinge of envy smote him; envy, mixed with vicarious rapture, for Larry was a sentimental soul.

Susie Belle—and she was the gamest little kid, as well as the prettiest, that Larry ever hoped to meet—was curled up in the big seat, her honey-colored head resting in the crook of Red's free arm. She was fast asleep. And Red seemed to be dreaming, too, as he sat there, half smiling, a look of utter content on his freckled, sunburned face.

"Gosh," said Red, laughing softly, "won't my old boss be plumb surprised? Boy, oh, boy!"

Pioneer Woman

By Olive King Dixon

Laughing at hardships, courageous on limitless ranges, this true daughter of the Old West looks back on a full life and tells you her own story.

I CAME from my home in Virginia to the Texas Panhandle in the spring of 1893. I am third to the youngest of ten children. My father, Robert Woods King, and my mother, Mary Jane Blankenship King, were both born and reared in Virginia. My father was a Confederate soldier, and fought at Gettysburg, Winchester and in other important engagements.

My great-great-grandfather, General Andrew Lewis, won distinction during the Revolutionary War and commanded the battle of Point Pleasant, 1774. General Lewis was a native of Ireland. He owned large land grants in Roanoke and Montgomery Counties, Virginia.

Katherine Lewis King, my grandmother, inherited a part of this land located on Bent Mountain near Roanoke. The homestead was built of native logs and on my last trip there was in a fair state of preservation. It was here that I was born, January 30, 1873. My father died when I was five years old. My mother died in 1924, at the age of ninety.

Two of my brothers, Albert and Archie King, had come West several years before I came and were working on big ranches at the time. My brother, Archie, with whom I made my home, lived with his wife and one-year-old son, Woods, in a line camp on Johns Creek, in Hutchinson County, on the Canadian River, thirty miles from the ranch headquarters which was located on Wolf Creek in Ochiltree County. This was the Bar C Ranch and their cattle ranged over parts of Roberts and Ochiltree Counties, and was managed by J. W. Todd.

My first experience of the West was a short time after I came to the Panhandle. Mrs. Walstad, my sister-in-law's mother, lived in Ochiltree County, twenty-five miles from where my brother lived. The family were natives of Norway and had come to America before she was born, first settling in Kansas and in 1887, moving down into the Panhandle of Texas, establishing a home on the flats where Mr. Wal-

stad, strong and progressive, built a cedar picket house and covered it with dirt. Water was scarce on the flats, the Walstads hauling it eight miles the first year.

The girls in the Walstad family were all splendid riders and could rope a horse as easily as a man could. They rode long distances after stock in all kinds of weather.

A trip to my sister-in-law's home was planned. My brother discouraged the trip, telling us it would be better to wait until the spring work was over so that he could go with us. But no, Sena and I were going at this time. Of the many horses kept on the place only two could be spared which were broken to harness, one of which had never been ridden. These were small obstacles to be considered by two young women bent on an outing.

The morning we started dawned clear and warm. The horses were brought to the door of the three-room sod house. In the meantime I had been told by Sena to get a gallon jug and fill it full of water. That was something odd. Coming from a country where it is almost impossible to travel very far without crossing a stream, the idea of carrying a jug of water was really amusing. However, I was to find out before the trip was over with

how essential a jug of water is in this Western country where one travels miles and miles without crossing a stream.

"Stay on the trail," warned my brother, "until you get on top on the rimrock where you will find a fence running east and west. Afterwards, there will be no danger of losing the way. On Patch Creek stop for lunch and rest and feed the team." Oh, what fun for us girls!

At last we were off, the horses prancing and impatient. The little one-year-old nephew sat happily between us, pointing with his chubby hands at each passing herd of cattle contentedly grazing in the river bottoms. Once in a while a deer or antelope leaped from its hiding place in the tall grass and gracefully disappeared over a knoll.

Added to the happiness of the little party was the fragrance of the wild flowers that dotted the prairie. Never before having seen anything west of the Mississippi I was enthralled with the splendor and magic of the boundless horizon.

By noon we had reached the halfway place spoken of by my brother. This was a bachelor's home. Bill Witsell, coming to the door of his log house, bade us welcome and invited us to stay for lunch. The noon meal was called dinner in those days. The team was unhitched and led away to the corral to be fed and watered. Shall I tell you what we had for dinner? Delicious sourdough biscuits, fried potatoes, beefsteak, stewed fruit and black coffee, all cooked on the open fire.

All morning we had traveled in a big cow pasture and not one living soul had we met on the way. Again we were off. Traveling at a steady gait we mounted the rimrock and found ourselves on the level Plains.

Sena was tired of driving and I took the reins. The road was rugged and barely more than a cow trail. In a short time something appeared to be seriously wrong. The tire on the left wheel of the cart had come off and the spokes were dropping out one by one. This was a predicament, and at once Sena realized the seriousness of the situation. Though I am ashamed to

admit it today, I threw my head back and laughed.

Here we were, two lone women and a year-old baby, far out on the Plains, fifteen miles from the nearest house, with only one of the horses safe to ride. The most encouraging thought was the gallon jug of water which a few hours before had puzzled me.

Something must be done and that quickly. One of us must go for help. Sobered by this time and ready to obey orders, I offered to go. Sena told me to stay on the trail and never to leave the line fence.

On and on I rode without saddle or blanket. After riding eight or ten miles—afterwards it was found I was almost in sight of the Walstad home—I decided I had missed the way and turned back. And met Sena! This was too much. Hastily telling me to take care of the baby and wait for her return, she mounted the horse and was soon out of sight, riding at a steady gallop. I was alone on the vast Plains with a little baby. . . .

Night came on and I shall never forget that night. One by one the stars came out. My blood chilled to the wailing cry of a coyote. The baby stirred and began to cry. He was hungry. He wanted a drink but the water jug had been left with the cart as I walked on ahead on foot.

But my fears quickly passed. I distinctly heard voices. Sena and her brother were coming and in a very short time a Spaulding hack drawn by two bay horses carried us, amid much talking and laughter, to the Walstad home. There, with true Western hospitality, we were welcomed.

THE FOLLOWING fall I was engaged to teach a small school on the south side of the Canadian River between Tallahone and Reynolds Creeks. The schoolhouse was built of cottonwood logs and was about twelve feet square, covered with dirt. There were no desks or modern fixtures. A barrel of drinking water was hauled once a week. There were large cracks between the logs and when the weather turned cold, my pupils and I chinked and daubed the walls to keep out the wind and snow.

There were only five children in the neighborhood old enough to go to school. My oldest pupil was the late George Whittenburg, rated at the time of his death, a few years ago, as one of the wealthiest oil and stockmen in the Panhandle.

During the school term I boarded with a Portuguese family by the name of Lewis. The Lewis family consisted of Joe Lewis, a bachelor, John Lewis and his wife and five-year-old son, Junior. The brothers owned a small ranch and ran about two hundred head of cattle. Mrs. Lewis, just recently from her native country, spoke English brokenly, and it was with the understanding that I help her with the English language that I was taken into their home.

Wild game was plentiful in those days, such as deer, antelope, wild turkey and quail, and the creeks were alive with fish. Mrs. Lewis was a wonderful cook and, with the larder always supplied with one or the other of these delicious foods, there was no scarcity of something good to eat.

Thanskgiving Day, 1893, dawned clear and bright after a night that was cold enough to freeze a quarter-inch of ice over the water bucket on a back bench. The entire citizenship of the county at that time, about thirty persons in all, had been invited to partake of a Thanksgiving dinner of wild turkey.

Besides the monster turkey which Mrs. Lewis placed on the long improvised table, there were platters of deer, quail and other wild game.

By noon the meal was ready and cowboys from the Turkey Track Ranch and other guests sat down to enjoy the feast. Mr. Lewis asked the

blessing of God on all present and those in need the world over.

After dinner the holiday crowd left the Lewis home, headed for Parnell by horseback, buggy and buckboard where an old-fashioned dance was to be staged. Here they were joined by scores of persons from other settlements and, to the music of a violin and a banjo, the happy crowd danced in the court-room of the two-story frame court-house.

Dances were not like the ones now, starting at a designated time. Dancing started as soon as anyone arrived and lasted until sun-up. The only intermission during the dance was at 12 o'clock when time was taken off for a midnight lunch which consisted of roast turkey, lightbread, pies, cake and black coffee.

Those were gay, lively days.

Now it was over two miles to the schoolhouse from the Lewis home and I rode the distance horseback on a bay pony that was my own special property. Each morning when he was bridled and saddled he knew exactly the route to take which led through sandhills the greater part of the way to the schoolhouse.

It was here that I met William Dixon, whom I married in 1894 at the Lewis home. A minister drove seventy-four miles from Mobeetie to perform the ceremony. Everyone in the neighborhood, including my brother's family, were present at the wedding, possibly fifteen persons in all.

The evening I was married I went to live at Old Adobe Walls, where my husband had lived as a bachelor since 1883. He had a well improved place. A young orchard of two hundred trees were bearing for the first time. This was the first orchard planted in Hutchinson County and some of the trees are still standing. The little log house, to be seen in the accompanying illustration, stood on the ruins of Old Adobe Walls and was my first home. It was about fourteen feet square and stood three-quarters of a mile south of where the noted Adobe Walls Indian battle of June 27, 1874, was fought.

A legend has grown up around Old Adobe Walls which some historians believe to have been built by Col. William Bent, noted Rocky Mountain fur-trader of the first half of the last century. Col. Bent had a number of trading posts along the upper Arkansas River in eastern Colorado for the purpose of trading with the Comanche, Kiowas and Prairie Apache Indians. If it is true that Old Adobe Walls was established by Col. Bent and his associates, a tradition remains that they merely seized upon a site that had been occupied at an even earlier date by men of whom nothing is known, save that they are believed to have come from the Spanish settlements in New Mexico.

It is a well known fact that this place was the site of one of the greatest Indian battles ever fought in the Southwest. This battle took place in November, 1864, while the War Between the States was still in progress. The leader of the troops was the peerless Kit Carson, later made a brigadier general in the United States army. It has been estimated that there were three thousand Kiowa, Arapahoe and Comanche Indians in this battle while Carson's men numbered about four hundred.

There are stories of buried treasure at Old Adobe Walls and strangers have appeared there in search of it. One of these treasure hunters was an old gray-haired man who came after the country was settled up. His story

was that a pack train loaded with gold and silver bullion had been attacked at this place by Indians. In its extremity the besieged party buried the gold and silver. Only one or two members of the expedition escaped massacre, including a Catholic priest.

At the time of which I write there were no other settlers in Hutchinson County. The entire county, with the exception of the land owned by my husband, was controlled by the Hansford Land and Cattle Company, a Scotch syndicate, known as the Turkey Track Ranch, today owned by Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Coble of Amarillo, Texas. This was one of the first ranches in the Panhandle. The range expanded over the most of two counties, and the company ran about 50,000 head of cattle. Generally about thirty or forty cowboys were kept on the ranch to care for the stock. One man was kept to care for a pack of hounds which were used to hunt wolves and coyotes.

DOBE WALLS' post-office was established in 1883, first being located at the ranch headquarters and later at the Dixon home. My husband was the first postmaster and served as such for twenty years. During this time there was no other post-office in the county. The mail first came out from Canadian, a distance of fifty miles, and was carried horseback twice a week. Later the mail route was changed, coming out by buckboard from Miami, Texas, making the trip three times a week.

For almost three years I was the only woman living in Hutchinson County. J. M. Coburn, general manager of the Turkey Track Ranch, with offices in Kansas City, Mo., would bring his family and a number of guests to the ranch for a short visit during the summer, but they soon tired of the monotony of ranch life and returned to their homes in the city. There were months when I did not see any living being except my husband and the cowboys who rode the range. Did I get lonesome and long for my Virginia home? Not at all. I think I must have inherited a love of adventure from my forefathers of Colonial days, and this was exactly to my liking.

There were a number of line camps scattered over the range where one or more men were kept to feed and care for the stock. Sometimes my husband would take me on Sunday to spend the day in one of these camps. The men cooked in Dutch ovens on the open fire. Sometimes there would be baked wild turkey; other times wild duck or quail. Always there were sourdough biscuit and stewed dried fruit. On the outside of the house often hung a quarter of beef or deer.

Once a year we made a twenty-five mile trip down the river to visit my brother's family. Another time we would drive the same distance into Hansford County to visit the Cator family on the Palo Duro Creek. Some time during the year these same families would come to Adobe Walls to visit us. These visits lasted several days. Often we took a camping outfit and went up on Moores Creek overnight to hunt wild turkey, which were plentiful and roosted in the tall cottonwood trees along the stream. In the winter when we wanted venison, my husband took his rifle and killed a fine buck. A large herd of deer grazed on the alfalfa field near the house and were almost as tame as cattle. A covey of Mexican quail ran with the chickens and roosted with them at night.

Much water has run under the bridge since I came to the Texas Panhandle. I have seen many changes. Never have I regretted that I came. I am glad to have had a small part in the early development of the State that has been my home for almost half a century.

Calamity Range

By Paul Evan Lehman

Conclusion

THE STORY SO FAR:

NATHANIEL CAMERON, owner of the Stars and Bars.

NANCY CAMERON, Nat's proud and lovely daughter.

ROBERT CAMERON, Nancy's hot-headed brother.

JEDEDIAH CLARK, owner of the Double Link.

NEIL CLARK, Jed's elder son.

AB SHATTUCK, crooked and designing money lender.

DAVE SHATTUCK, Ab's unscrupulous son.

SEEGAR STEVENS and GLOOMY, old-timers on Clark ranch.

REVEREND WILLINGHAM, and his wife, KATE, itinerant gospel workers.

CURT BENDER, head of the Cameron gunnies hired by Ab Shattuck.

A feud has raged between the Clarks and the Camerons ever since a girl named Catherine, whom Nathaniel Cameron and Jedediah Clark both loved, spurned them and fled. Neil, believing this warfare to be a dreadful and senseless waste of men and money, attempts to make peace. The hired guns of the Cameron faction repulse his efforts and a fight ensues which burns the hotel where Nancy is staying overnight. Neil rescues her and they are immediately drawn to each other.

Nancy's father and brothers, Will and Robert, are tipped off by that prince of tale-bearers, Dave Shattuck, that she and Neil are meeting secretly. Robert is particularly incensed that his sister would even speak to a Clark, and he lies in wait to kill Neil. Sam, Neil's brother, rides by instead, and is shot by an unseen ambusher.

Because sign points to Robert's having been on the death trail, the Clarks, and even Nancy, believe him guilty of Sam's murder. Robert flees.

The Clarks vow vengeance, and open warfare is declared between the two factions. Cameron goes to Ab Shattuck for a loan to fight the Clarks. The crooked money lender agrees to give him the loan because he is trying to stir up further enmity between the two ranches so that he can, vulture-like, pick up the leavings after they have killed each

other off. He hires his own gunnies for Cameron to fight the Clarks.

Furthermore, his son, Dave, is wild to possess Nancy and one of the conditions of the loan is that he be allowed to court her.

Dave forces Nancy to agree to marry him as his price for silence, as he swears that he has proof that her brother killed Sam. Nancy, most reluctantly, agrees.

Reverend Willingham and his wife, Kate, attempt to make peace between the Clarks and the Camerons, but their efforts are in vain when Nancy discovers Neil beside the body of her other brother, Will. Neil denies killing Will but open battle follows and Neil is captured, only to be released by Robert who has been away trying to trace down the real killer of Sam. Dave tells Nancy that he was the one who rescued Neil and out of gratitude she prepares to marry him.

Robert and Neil discover that their brothers were killed by the same man, riding the same horse and shooting a Sharps rifle. They force Slug Groody, one of Shattuck's gunnies, to admit that Ab is behind the whole plot and is planning to bring sheep into the valley. Ab kills Slug for talking.

As Nancy starts to marry Dave, Neil breaks up the ceremony and rides off with Nancy, hiding her in a cabin with Jed, Seegar and Gloomy. Neil goes out to fend off the Camerons who have followed them and a shot is aimed directly at him, as Nat still doesn't know of Shattuck's perfidy.

CHAPTER XIX

"Vengeance Is Mine"

THE BULLET fired by Dave Shattuck did not touch Neil, for Nat Cameron, with a sharp oath, had knocked Dave's arm upward. As Shattuck turned angrily to see who had cheated him of his revenge, Cameron spoke heatedly.

"Are you crazy? They have my Nancy. Have you no thought for her?"

"He took her, didn't he? Damn his soul! I'll blast the livin' daylight out of him!"

"If you try it I'll down you in your tracks! With him in our hands we can get her back. Kill him, and God alone knows what will happen to her."

Dave listened, his face screwed into

a scowl, his burning eyes fixed on Neil with a look of venomous hatred in them.

Cameron went on: "No use to dicker with them tonight; we couldn't get close enough to make them understand what we want. Search him and tie him up good. Curt, you and Dave and a couple others stay here to guard him. I'll move as close as I can get to the shack and come mornin' I'll speak to them under a flag of truce."

He gathered the men he wanted and led them up the canyon. While one of the crew held the flaming pine knot, Bender searched Neil thoroughly, removing the clasp knife which was his only remaining weapon. Curt then bound his arms behind him and dropped the loop of a rope over his head, tightening it about his neck.

"Reckon that'll hold you. We'll camp up the trail a piece; it's too rough here. Lead off, Clark."

They followed Neil until they reached the place where his horse had been shot beneath him. The animal was alive and suffering, so Bender shot him. Neil's feet were now bound and the free end of the rope fastened about a stunted pine.

"Just lay down and make yourself at home," advised Bender. "Reckon you know better than to try to get loose. Keep right quiet, and come mornin' we'll swap you for the girl; start somethin' and we'll put you to bed with a spade."

Neil stretched out on the ground. below him, one of the men kindled a fire, and the guards gathered about it. Dave sat sullen and morose, his sixgun still in his hand. In his present temper the slightest suspicious move on Neil's part would have brought a quick slug through the head.

With his hands bound behind him, the only comfortable position Neil could find was on his side. He lay there, gaze fixed absently on a clump of chaparral. If he remained still, his life was in no danger; and in the morning his father would readily agree to an exchange. That meant he would be free, and Nancy, with the information Jed Clark would have given her, would have nothing to fear from Dave Shattuck.

But dare he let this information reach Nat Cameron yet? If the murderer of Neil's brother and Nancy's brother was among the men in the canyon, he would be forewarned and could make his escape. And Neil, if he were returned to the cabin, would be unable to make contact with Robert. Escape seemed out of the question. The only alternative was to tell Cameron himself and pledge him to secrecy until the net had closed about the killer.

He addressed Bender. "Curt, I'd like to speak to Nat Cameron. If I go with him we can get in touch with my father tonight and end this thing."

"I reckon we'll wait until mornin'."

"I'd like to see him just the same. If you send a man—"

"Shut up, you!" spat Dave. "We're runnin' this show."

That was that.

The night dragged by. Curt and his two men took turns watching Neil and keeping up the fire. Dave sat on the ground, smoking nervously, his vigilance never relaxing. Neil remained on his side, gaze fixed on the clump of brush.

Suddenly his face tightened. Somebody had just added fuel to the fire, and in the glare which followed Neil saw something which gave forth a dull glint lying in the chaparral. It was the sixgun which had been jarred from his holster!

Hope of escape flared for a moment like the flames, only to die as quickly. No matter how he maneuvered, the gun would be out of his reach. And his arms were bound. He worked quietly at the bonds for a few seconds, but they held firmly and he could not use much force without attracting Dave's attention. . . .

Dawn came, and the fire was allowed to die. Presently the sound of hoofs reached him, and a moment later Nat Cameron rode up with his men.

"It's all arranged. Get up, Clark. Bender, cut those ropes. Leave the one around his neck."

Curt cut the hemp and Neil was permitted to flex his cramped muscles until the circulation was restored. As he tramped back and forth he managed to get to the clump of brush beneath which his sixgun was concealed. One thought remained uppermost in his mind: he must get to Robert; the murderer must not be warned.

Curt and his men were tightening their cinches. Dave had got to his feet but the sixgun was still in his hand. His horse was headed down the trail, rein-anchored by a stone. Neil remembered that Dave had not loosened the cinch on the animal.

"Mount up, boys, and we'll ride," said Cameron.

Neil reached swiftly upward and seized the loop with both hands. A single swift movement and he had thrown the rope clear. Snatching the gun from the ground, he leaped directly at Dave.

Shattuck's gun came up, but before it reached a level the weapon in Neil's hand blazed. At that short range he could not miss. Dave's Colt was torn from his hand, and the force of the blow swung him partly around. Neil leaped over the rump of the horse and into the saddle, digging savagely with his spurs. The animal leaped forward, almost unseating him.

No time to bother with the reins now! Bending low Neil continued to rake the startled horse with his spurs, praying that the animal would not trip itself by stepping on the dangling leather.

Guns roared and lead seared the air about him; but it was still very early, and shooting at a moving target in that uncertain light was bound to be erratic.

Even above the noise of his own flight he could hear the pound of hoofs; but the frightened animal beneath him was running like one possessed. Neil presently reached forward and succeeded in grasping the rein. After that there was nothing to it. The sounds of pursuit diminished, and finally were lost altogether.

Neil did not appreciably slacken his horse's speed until he reached the place where he was to meet Robert, who had gone on an expedition to find who owned a Sharps rifle. Here Neil withdrew into the timber and had the satisfaction of seeing Curt Bender and his pursuers sweep by on their way to Concho. Dave, being afoot, had been left behind. Cameron and his Stars and Bars men had remained to keep the ones in the cabin bottled up.

The sun was an hour high when Curt and his riders came sweeping back, to turn into the Stars and Bars trail. And within five minutes of their passing Robert Cameron rode into sight and drew rein to whistle.

Neil replied, and Robert joined him. Cameron was tight-lipped and a bit disheartened.

"Find out anything?" asked Neil.

"Yes; but it don't help a bit. The only Sharps rifle besides Groody's is owned by a man named Frank Daly. Used to hunt and peddle his meat around Concho. He moved out of the valley a year ago."

"There must be another that we don't know anything about," said Neil. "I reckon those horse tracks are all we have left to go on, Bob."

"Yeah, I reckon they are."

The two men squatted on their heels by their horses and rolled cigarets.

"Neil, I heard about your savin' Nancy from marryin' that Shattuck devil. I shore owe you one for that, pardner."

Neil smiled grimly. "I can remember the time when you would have shot me for running off with her."

"That time has passed, Neil. What a hot-headed fool I was! Say, what is Curt Bender chasin' around the country after?"

"Me," said Neil, and told him about it. "I just had to meet you, Bob. If Nancy spilled the beans, as she likely would have, the killer—"

He broke off suddenly, staring at the ground. Robert looked at him wonderingly, then followed the direction of his gaze. He sprang to his feet.

"Those tracks! Neil, whose horse are you ridin'?"

Neil, too, was standing now. "Dave Shattuck's! Bob!" He strode to the far side of the animal, and his shout of triumph brought Robert to him in three jumps.

"There it is! Right in the boot! *A Sharps rifle!*"

Bob dragged the weapon from its sheath. "S. G. carved on the stock. Neil, Dave Shattuck bought it from Slug! Dave is the murderer of your brother and mine!"

"Let's go," said Neil. "By jacks, we'll nail his hide to the barn!"

They leaped into their saddles and pushed through the brush to the trail. Once on it, they fed their mounts steel and humped them back along the Clark road.

"He's my meat!" cried Robert. "He framed me and killed Will! Neil, leave him to me!"

"He shot my brother through the back," replied Neil tightly. "I swore I'd get the man who did it if I never did another thing."

Around the bend in the trail they swept, on past the Clark headquarters, turned into Cougar Canyon. Stirrup to stirrup they rode, two hard-faced, determined sons of the West on vengeance bent. Even on the up-grade they did not spare their mounts. And presently far ahead of them they sighted Cameron's group of riders, dismounted and deployed just out of rifle range of the cabin.

The noise of their approach brought Nat Cameron about, staring. He looked hard at them, then started running, his arms waving.

"Robert!" he shouted as he ran.

They pulled their horses to their haunches, eyes flashing from man to man. "Where's Dave Shattuck?" cried Robert. "Where is the dirty skunk?"

"Robert! Where have you been? What does this mean—your ridin' with a Clark?"

"Never mind that now, Dad. *Where's Shattuck?*"

"He's crazy; plumb crazy. Took half a dozen ropes and climbed to the rim of the canyon. Figures on lettin' himself down behind the shack. There he is now!"

Cameron had turned and was pointing to the place where the walls met high above the cabin. Outlined against the sky was a man, and even at that distance they knew him for Dave Shattuck. He was letting down a thin thread of rope, knotting one lariat to the other as he paid them out.

"Out of range!" cried Robert. "Oh, the damned killer! Father, he's the one who shot Sam Clark and our Will! We got the goods on him. And now he's where I cain't get at him!"

"He killed our Will!" thundered Nat.

Neil explained quickly. "I thought Robert killed Sam; was sure of it when he disappeared. But Robert was simply trying to clear his name by tracking down the real killer. He found the prints of the fellow's horse, and the empty cartridge. It was a Sharps that did it, not a Winchester. Later we found the same tracks near where Will was shot, and knew the same man had done both dirty jobs. When I escaped from you with Shattuck's horse, I met Bob and we had it cinched. This is the horse he rode, and there is the rifle he used."

"God forgive me, I thought for a while that Robert had done it too," said Nat. Then he drew himself erect and looked Neil proudly in the face. "But a Cameron, sir, does not kill from ambush."

"I know that now, Mr. Cameron. I believe I felt it in my heart the whole time. That's why I didn't shoot Robert yesterday when I ran across him. That and Mr. Willingham's reminder that vengeance belongs to Someone higher than us."

"He's goin' down the rope!" cried a Stars and Bars rider.

Their eyes went to the tiny figure at the top of the canyon. Dave was lowering himself over the rim.

"Got a loop around his foot," observed another. "Boys, he got a long way to go before he reaches Miss Nancy."

Fascinated, they watched. Slowly the figure descended, sliding now, the rope twisted about one foot checking his speed. Dave reached the first knot and hung on with his hands while he worked his foot past the connection. At the end of the second rope he repeated this.

"He's goin' to make it!" cried Robert. "Neil! Go up there and warn your father."

"We'll all go," said Neil.

He strode before them, waving his arms. Presently the door opened and Jed and Seegar and Gloomy came out, followed almost at once by Nancy.

"It's all right!" called Neil. "Dave Shattuck is the one who killed Sam. There he is now."

Jed Clark turned and looked at the figure descending the rope. He had raised his rifle to fire when Neil reached him and pulled the weapon out of line.

"Let's wait a bit," he said quietly. "Somehow I feel— There he goes!"

Dave had come to the third knot, and this time his foot caught. Apparently one of his spurs had become entangled in the rope. He was kicking wildly in an effort to free it. Holding on with one hand, he attempted to draw up his foot so he could reach it with the other. And suddenly he lost his grip.

A gasp came from the audience as they saw him grab frantically at the rope and miss. They heard his dismayed cry, to be cut short as he brought up sharply, dangling by one heel, head down. Kicking with his free leg, doubling his body as he sought to reach the rope, he swung back and forth, twisting and turning, completely helpless.

And then his foot came loose and he fell! They heard his despairing cry, heard the sickening crunch as he struck the rocks behind the cabin.

"Fell plumb smack in a rattler den," said Seegar callously. "Of all the places to git down he had to pick that one. . . . Gimme a match, Neil; my seegar's out."

Neil fumbled absently in his vest pocket. He was thinking just then of the words spoken by the Reverend Willingham: *"Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord."*

CHAPTER XX

Out of the Past

IT WAS a sober group that rode down the canyon shortly thereafter. At the head of the party were Jed Clark, Nat Cameron, Neil and Seegar. Jed rode far to one side, Nat as far to the other. Enemies they had been for so many years that even now, when the whole wicked plot of the Shattucks had been revealed, neither could bring himself to the point of offering the hand of friendship to the other.

Behind the leaders rode a score of Stars and Bars cowboys. Behind them came Gloomy and Nancy.

They had reached the mouth of the canyon before they heard the beat of hoofs which announced the return of Curt Bender and the Shattuck men.

Neil spoke quietly. "Come on, Dad and Seegar. We'll drop back. Mr. Cameron must handle this."

Obediently the ones mentioned wheeled their horses and rode to the rear. Nat and his band continued on.

Into their midst rode Curt Bender and his men. He did not notice that the Stars and Bars riders were deployed on both sides of the trail so that he and his men must ride between them. Nat himself had dropped back and had halted his horse in the middle of the trail at the end of both lines.

Into this trap rode Curt, to pull up his horse and report.

"Couldn't find hide nor hair of him,

Cameron. He's lit out for the hills."

"You can all put up your hands," said Nat. His old Colt was out and aimed at Curt Bender's heart. "Every one of you dirty sheepherders get your hands in the air."

Bender swore. "What in hell are you talkin' about?"

"Put up your hands, sir, or I'll blow you out of that saddle!"

Curt glanced over his shoulder. Each Stars and Bars rider had drawn a weapon and had one of his men covered. And then Jed and Neil and Seegar rode up, faces grim with determination.

"So you tumbled to the play, eh?" said Bender. "Well, it was a good game while it lasted. What are your terms?"

"Neil Clark and Seegar will ride down the line and take your weapons. Then we will all ride to Concho and a bit beyond. We will see you to a good start, gentlemen, without a weapon among you. If you are wise you will keep going."

"Keno," growled Bender.

The plan was followed strictly. As the disarmed sheepmen rode slowly out of Concho, Ab Shattuck glanced through the window at them and blinked. Then he got ponderously to his feet and waddled to the door. There in the entrance he stood, stony-faced and silent, as his men were escorted from town by Cameron and Clark.

In an hour's time they returned and the whole body halted before his door. Ab sat behind his desk, face inscrutable save for a tiny cynical twist at the corner of his mouth. They couldn't bluff him. They might have found out about the sheep, but he still held the whip-hand.

A knock sounded sharply and he grunted, "Come in." The door opened to admit Nat, Jed, Neil and Seegar, Gloomy, Bob and Nancy. They halted in a group before his desk.

"The lion seems to be lyin' with the lamb," sneered Ab.

"At lyin', sir, I reckon you got them both beat," answered Nat. "Your dirty plan to set us against each other in order to clear the range for sheep has been discovered. We are here to tell you that you can send your sheep elsewhere."

"Don't think so," answered Ab. "You forget that note for twenty-five thousand."

"Due in ten months, sir. In that time I shall be able to liquidate it in full."

"Ten months hell. That note's for *ten days*, and it's due today."

"That's a lie! The term of the loan is ten months."

"Note speaks for itself." Ab held the paper up so that all could see it. "That your signature?"

Cameron's face had gone white. "Yes, it is. But—why, you swindler you! You've filled it out for ten days!"

"Nothin' has been changed since you signed it. Your eyes were open. I wrote it out, and you put your name to it. Makes it good."

"Why, damn you! You know the loan was to be for ten months!"

"Didn't understand it thataway. Figgered you'd clean out the Clarks and settle up at once. Ten days it is. Due today. Can you pay it?"

"No; of course I can't. Shattuck, you devil! You've ruined me."

"Reckon the sheep come in, huh?"

"You'd sell me out?"

"Yes."

Nat Cameron bowed his head, and Neil saw the tears on his lashes. He spoke quietly. "Mind if I look at that note again, Ab?"

"Look at it all you want, so long as I hold it. You ain't gonna grab it and destroy it, if that's your idea."

Ab raised the note and held it so they could see it again.

Quite suddenly Neil laughed. "I reckon you won't have much trouble paying that note, Mr. Cameron. Ab, did you ever hear the expression, 'hoist by his own petard'? You're a slick fellow, Ab; so slick that you fooled yourself. You were so anxious to fill that note out for ten days, that you forgot

to write 'thousand' after the twenty-five! Ab, that note is made out for *twenty-five dollars!"*

"Huh?" Ab blinked, then swiftly reversed the note and scanned it. A look of almost comical incredulity came over his face and he collapsed like a punctured balloon. With a groan he dropped the note to his desk, only to snatch it again and straighten. "The figures say twenty-five thousand! That will hold good."

"Not when the *written* amount is twenty-five dollars."

"It's a mistake!" shrilled Shattuck, his slowness of speech forgotten. "Nat Cameron knows it's a mistake!"

"I'll readily admit that when you confess that the ten days is a mistake also," said Cameron. "I have no desire to dodge my obligations, sir. We will draw up a new note for the proper amount *and the proper time.* Fortunately I have all the ten thousand I borrowed last, together with some of the preceding five. I will meet the new note when it is due."

Ab was licked and he knew it. He reached for another blank note and filled it out correctly. Nat read it this time, and then signed it.

"Now, sir, I hope you realize that to bring sheep into this valley would be another mistake. We will fight you, sir, to the last ditch. And you will not have the help of your son."

Ab started. "Dave? What have you done with him?"

"The Almighty has done for him, sir. He has reaped the reward of his wickedness. Your son, with or without your knowledge, laid in ambush and shot Sam Clark, thus throwing suspicion on me and my sons. And later he shot my Will, knowing that the blame would fall on Neil Clark. Today, while trying to get down a canyon wall with ropes, he fell and was killed."

Ab sank back in his chair, his face working. In that moment he became an old man. "Dave—dead!" he faltered. "My boy—dead."

"Yes. Perhaps you have human instinct enough left in you to know now how we felt when we lost our sons. You're through, Ab Shattuck. You will leave the valley and never return. Good day, sir." He turned and strode from the room.

The others followed.

"Well, where do we go from here?" asked Seegar. "Judgment has overtook the onrighteous, and I still have one seegar left."

"Bury it deep and we'll all be happy," suggested Gloomy.

"There is just one more thing to do in order to make the day perfect," said Neil. His arm was about Nancy, and she was standing with downcast eyes and the roses in her cheeks. "Nancy and I have talked it over. We're going down to the Reverend Willingham's blessed tent and be married—right now."

"Nancy!" cried her father.

She went to him swiftly. "Oh, Dad, it must be! Don't you see that it is written? Neil saved me from the fire; he saved me from marrying a murderer. And I do love him, Dad; honestly I do!"

He rested his hand on her upturned head and regarded her fondly. "Yes, child, I reckon it is written so. And I do know you love him; knew it that day when you cried your warnin' to him when Slug tried to kill him. God bless you, child." He turned slowly to Neil and for a moment they regarded each other quietly.

"And me?" asked Neil softly.

"And you too, son."

Leaving their horses, they walked down the street to the gospel tent. Nat strode at the side of his daughter, Jed walked on the outside with his son. The two men had not yet spoken to each other.

Willingham came to meet them, his homely face all smiles; for the Stars and Bars crew had spread the news.

"God be praised!" cried the preacher fervently, extending his hands to Neil and Nancy. "And if I read your faces a-right, it's my services you'll be requiring. Come inside, friends. Never

before have I been so happy to lend my aid. God bless you all!"

Into the tent they filed, and once more took positions before the altar railing. Nat still stood by his daughter, and Jed, not to be outdone, stood by Neil. Willingham went to the entrance of the little tent.

"Kate! We need you, my dear. Our good friends Nancy and Neil are to be joined in holy wedlock, and it is their wish that you be present."

"Kate!" Neil heard his father cry.

The flaps parted and Mrs. Willingham entered. It was daylight now, and she was not wearing the sunbonnet.

"Kate!" cried Nat Cameron. "Catherine King!"

"Yes," she answered softly, and gave him her left hand. The right she extended to Jed Clark who was staring as though at an apparition. "But it is Catherine Willingham now. Oh, Nat and Jed, how I have prayed for you! How your useless feud has distressed me! It was because of it that I urged my husband to come to Concho. I felt that I had broken your friendship; somehow I knew that God would let me heal it."

Neil gently drew Nancy away, leaving the two men at the altar, each held by a tiny hand of the woman both had loved in their youth.

"I want you to be friends," pleaded Mrs. Willingham. "For my sake—for the sake of the love you both once professed for poor me, I want it."

She pulled gently, and Nat stepped forward and to his left, while Jed moved forward and to his right. They were very close now. Still smiling appealingly, she joined their hands, pressed them tightly, stepped back.

"Nat!" said Jed huskily. "You—you danged old rebel!"

"Jed! You—you damned Yankee!"

"Bless you, brothers!" cried Willingham.

Gloomy spoke to his companion in a cracked whisper. "For gosh sake, Seegar, ditch that danged smoke! How in hell kin I pray inhalin' ammonia?"

(The End)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, OF RANCH ROMANCES, PUBLISHED BI-WEEKLY AT CHICAGO, ILL., FOR OCTOBER 1, 1938.

State of Illinois, County of Cook, SS:

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared E. F. Warner, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Ranch Romances, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of the form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business managers are: Publisher, E. F. Warner, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Fanny Ellsworth, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, J. B. Magill, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Business Managers, E. F. Warner, Pres., 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Elmer J. Chambers, Treas., 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Warner Publications, Inc., 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; E. F. Warner, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Joseph P. Shea, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Elmer J. Chambers, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; R. P. Holland, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Mardick Corp., 122 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Leo Kaplan, 122 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

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4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders, as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

E. F. WARNER, PUBLISHER.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1938. (Seal) Elmer J. Chambers. (My commission expires March 30, 1940.)

The Wrangler's Page

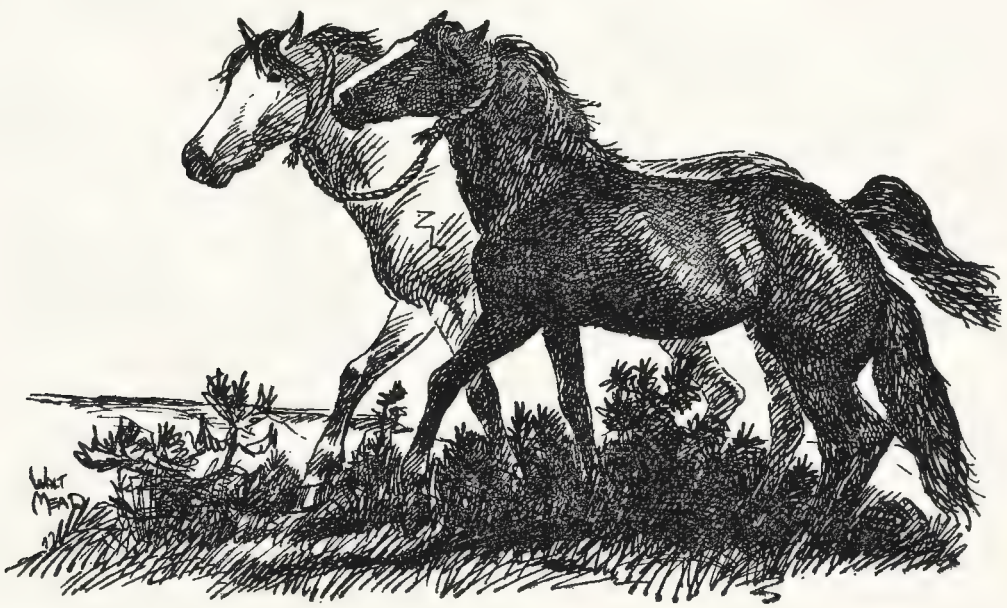
By Walt Mead

Halter Breaking

SOME horses are broke to halter when they are small colts. It all depends on how much time the owner has to fool with them.

If the rancher runs a large spread he usually lets the colts run on the range until they are old enough to break to saddle. That means the colts are three or four years old before they ever see a hackamore.

Many times an old saddle horse is used in helping to break a colt to lead. A stout rope is tied around the neck of each animal, with about three feet of slack between the two. It isn't long before the colt becomes rope wise, and he soon realizes that a jerk or pull on the rope will not win him his freedom. Being tied to one of his kind shows him there is nothing to fear.



Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

MANY of you rodeo fans write to me every day and ask me all sorts of questions. I get a kick out of supplying the answers—when I can—but now I think it's my turn. For a change, can you tell *me* any of the answers to these questions?

What's become of:

The Allen Sisters, who had a great Wild West show back in the days when rodeos were almost unheard of and Wild West outfits were as thick as burrs on a cayuse's tail?

Johnnie Mullens, who directed most of the major rodeos in those dim and long-ago days when my bronc's joints creaked instead of mine when I forked him?

Tillie Baldwin, who won so many honors at Guy Weadick's Sheepshead Bay Rodeo in 1916?

Bud Fisher, not the cartoonist, but the boy who rode the hoofs off those broncs in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and in the Young Buffalo show?

Norman and Donna Cowan, two of rodeo's most popular stars?

Fig Newton (I'm not making that name up, either), who was a remarkable trick-roper and whose chief delight was contesting against Montana Jack Ray?

Buff Vernon, who disappeared completely, as far as I know, from rodeo 'way back in the early days? I've heard rumors that he opened a hotel in Idaho somewhere.

Charley Tompkins, who owned one of the early Wild West shows back around 1910? Some folks claim Charley's mayor of a town in Oklahoma, and if he is, I bet that lucky town's still got a Frontier flavor.

Harry Sterling, the cowpoke who was presented with an even dozen baby buggies when he was married in Madison Square Garden?

Paul Hill, manager and producer of the annual Stock Yards Rodeo in Los Angeles, is adding many new bucking horses to his already large string. Being a commission merchant at the Stock Yards, Mr. Hill has stockmen all over the West on the lookout for broncs that will buck off top bronc-riders.

The Carmangay, Alta., Canada Rodeo and Stampede came out with a nice profit this year and the entire proceeds were turned over to a local hospital. When this rodeo started back in 1932, the gross receipts were

less than six hundred dollars. Today the box office takes in a couple of thousand dollars. That's some going for a small-town rodeo.

Bob Matthews, former arena secretary of the J E Ranch Rodeo, was kicked in the face by a wild Brahma steer at the rodeo in Providence, Rhode Island. He is in a very serious condition, and even if he lives it is feared he will lose the sight of one eye. Bob is one of the cowboys attached to Captain Dan Fox's outfit—the spotted horse troop of the New York State Police.

Jim Eskew, Senior, staged this rodeo, and outside of Bob's horrible accident, everything went smoothly. From Providence, the outfit went to Albany, N. Y., to put on the rodeo there under the direction of Charles Paul, Jr. Paul also stages the rodeo at Rochester, N. Y.

The Twentieth Annual San Luis Valley Ski-Hi Stampede drew huge crowds this year and John Beatty, secretary of the Stampede, merits rodeo's congratulations. This outfit started from scratch and has grown into one of the most important and exciting rodeos in the country.

Hugh Bennett made the fastest time at the Stampede when he threw his steer in 5:4 seconds. This kind of speed reminds old-timers of the day Tom Burnett, of Texas, offered a Buick coupé to any steer wrestler who could throw his steer in eight seconds or better. This was at the Fat Stock Show in Fort Worth, and that year the steers were the toughest that ever had come charging out of the arena.

Hugh Bennett, the same one, made the fastest time there, too, and threw his steer in eight and two fifths seconds. He lost that automobile by just two-fifths of one second —less time than it takes to say, "Damn it!" which is what Hugh said, though.

More prize monies will be piled up for the contestants at next year's Stampede, and tougher stock is promised the contestants—if it can be found.

John Birdsong, formerly Colonel W. T. Johnson's rodeo manager, will stage a bang-up rodeo at the Quachita Valley Fair at West Monroe, La., this fall. John says that the bucking and roping calves are going to be the wildest that were ever driven off the Panhandle country of West Texas. Which kind of makes me glad I'm writing about it instead of being made a fool out of by some beef critter.

Guy Weadick, the old-timer who made the Calgary Stampede the tremendous success that it is today, is no longer connected with that outfit. He is planning on staging a comeback in the States and with his experience and genius for organizing, he won't be able to fail.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

Editor's Note:—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of prose or verse or cartoons. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

The Hired Man's Soliloquy

When the frost is on the pump handle
And the bucket's full of ice;
When the mercury's down to zero,
Or lower, ain't it nice
To crawl out in the morning,
About four o'clock or so,
Build the kitchen fire
And then start shovelin' snow
Till you've dug a path out to the barn?
Ain't them stables warm and nice
When the frost is on the pump handle
And the bucket's full of ice?

When the cows have had their fodder
And the horses oats and hay,
And I'm sittin' on the milkin' stool,
My heart so light and gay,
The old cow gives her tail a whisk
Ker-slam against my ear;
The words I'm tempted then to say
Ain't proper for to hear;
But the way she fills the old pail up
With milk is worth the price
When the frost is on the pump handle
And the bucket's full of ice.

When milking time is over
And the horses harnessed, too,
The cook says, "Breakfast's ready!"
It sounds sweet, I'm tellin' you!
Then hurrah for homemade sausage!
And pancakes smokin' hot!
And that steamin', bubblin' liquor
From the good old coffee pot!
A drink like that is fine enough
For the President to sup!
And Dora smilin' at me
As she pours it in my cup!
Some day 'fore long, I reckon,
Her and me'll be gettin' spliced
When the frost has left the pump handle
And the bucket's free from ice.

Edward W. Perkins, Los Angeles, Calif.

The Cowboy Goes A-Courtin'

When the sun has settled gently
Far across the western sea,
And the moon is softly peeping
O'er the mountains to the lea.

Then the cowboy shines his boots
And slicks his curly hair,
'Cause the cowboy's goin' a-courtin'
And, o' course, he must prepare.

He whistles a tune to his pony,
And counts all the stars above.
The cowboy's heart is happy,
'Cause this is his night for love.

He swings into the saddle
And rides into the west,
A song upon his lips
And his guitar to his chest.

Over the hill and through the pass,
Strummin' that old guitar—
The cowboy has gone a-courtin'
Over on the Circle R.

Harry F. Seay, Winston-Salem, N. C.

Murder at the Circle W

Tim Benson, a new hand at the Circle W, leaned back against the corral fence and rubbed the nose of Santos, his favorite horse. Before him stood Dan Scott, the foreman of the ranch.

"Dan," said Tim, "do you know anything about the killin' last night?"

"No, I don't," said Dan. "Why would anyone want to kill Jane's father? He was so good to everyone."

Tim joined the rest of the punchers as Dan headed for the bunkhouse.

"Hello, Miss Jane," said the foreman.

"Dan, who do you think shot Daddy?"

"I think it was Benson," replied Dan. "He don't look so good to me."

That evening when the waddies were paid, Tim was missing. When Jane heard this she told the men to find him.

The sun shone brightly over Dog Town, a Western frontier village. Tim came out of the hotel and walked down to the corral, swung his saddle and blanket onto Santos' back. He rode far into the Badlands.

"Well, Santos," said Tim, "reckon you're all set for your trip to the mesquite where we might find out something. We have to find that killer."

Dismounting and creeping to the edge of the woods that bordered the Badlands, Tim saw a group of men seated around a campfire.

"What's new, Dan?" he heard one ask.

"Nothin', except we gotta get Benson."

Mounting, Tim rode silently away. Riding to the Circle W he saw Jane standing over by the corral fence.

"Hello, Jane," said Tim.

"Miss Jane to you," replied Jane hotly. "What do you want around here, Mr. Benson? I suppose you know that Stoney was killed last night."

"No, I don't." Stoney was another puncher around the place.

"You ought to, I guess you done it."

"You come along with me and I'll show you the murderer," exclaimed Tim, spurring his horse.

"Fellows," screamed Jane, "this killer is—There he goes!"

The cowboys jumped on their broncs and raced after Tim. There was a shot, the leading puncher fell from his saddle. Giving up the chase they dismounted where the rider lay.

"It's Tex! Is he hurt bad?"

"Hurt! He's dead."

Tim was riding down the trail toward Dog Town.

Going through Scarlet Canyon, he saw waddies branding cattle. Riding on into town he entered the Silver Saloon, seated himself at a table and grabbed a deck of cards.

A vaquero came over and sat down facing Tim. Dealing the cards, he took one. Turning it, he saw the ace of spades. The smile left the vaquero's face.

"*Señor*, that is the card of death," said the vaquero.

Later when Tim was leaving, a gun poked him in the back as he hard a rough voice behind him.

"Put 'em up, Benson, you're just about at the end of the trail."

With a quick motion Tim kicked the gun from the fellow's hand and drew his own.

"Everybody get back against the wall," shouted Tim.

In another instant he had shot out the lamp and was through the window.

Outside he saw a figure come out the back door and ride away. Yelling to the sheriff to follow him, Tim leaped on Santos' back and was burning leather toward the Circle W.

Riding swiftly in the gate at the Circle W he heard a shout.

"Tim, look out!"

Just then there was a shot. Tim ducked and turned Santos toward where the gunman was hiding. Dan Scott fired as he ran and made a flying leap onto the ranch-house porch and then inside. Tim jumped off Santos and leaped through the window.

"Dan, I'm giving you a chance that you didn't give Jane's father, Stoney or Tex. Draw!"

Both men went for their guns; before Dan's cleared leather Tim put daylight through him.

Outside the sheriff had ridden in with the posse and rounded up the rest.

"Sheriff," said Tim, "I want you to arrest Pete, Bob, Jack, Ken, and Buck, for rustlin' the Circle W cattle."

"Let's get goin' with these fellows. *Adios*, Ranger."

Later the moon shone brightly over the Texas plains and the Circle W cowboys were singing as a couple strolled by the corral.

"Tim, I didn't really think you did it," said Jane.

"Forget it. I'll take that foreman's job you offered me; I think I'll like it. I'm tired of being a Ranger."

Putting his arms around her he kissed her upturned lips.

There came a low whinny from the corral as Santos put his nose through the bars.

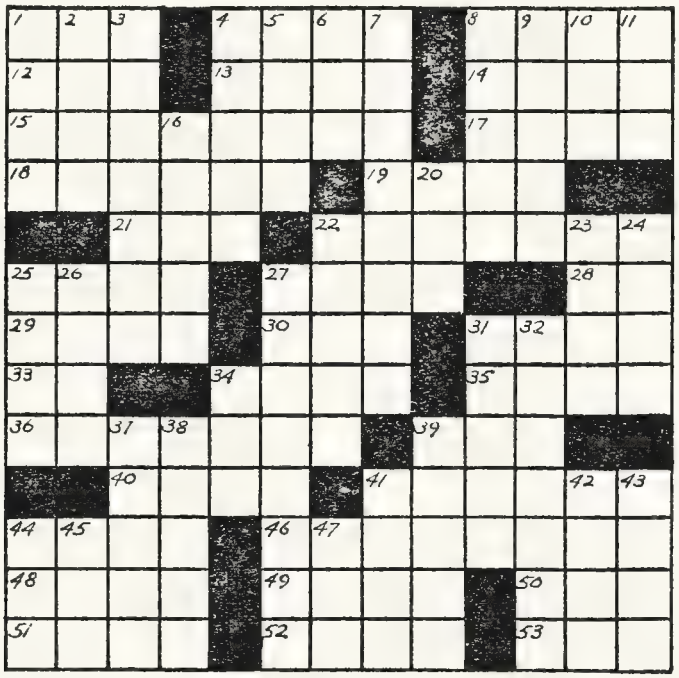
Betty E. Thomas,
Falling Waters, W. Va.

Bob Easterday, Estes Park, Colo.

Honorable Mention

Mrs. Norman Bain, Nevada, Mo.
Raymond Hines, Cincinnati, Ohio
H. Homeyer, Stephenson, Mich.
Helen Tollefson, Bend, Ore.
Arvel Adkins, West Yellowstone, Mont.

. . The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle



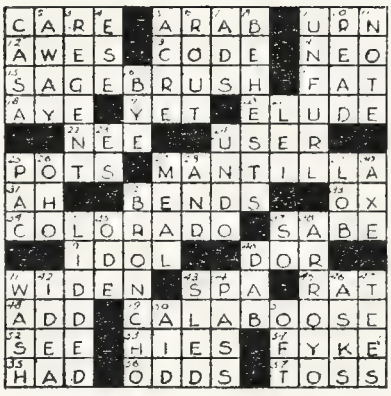
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

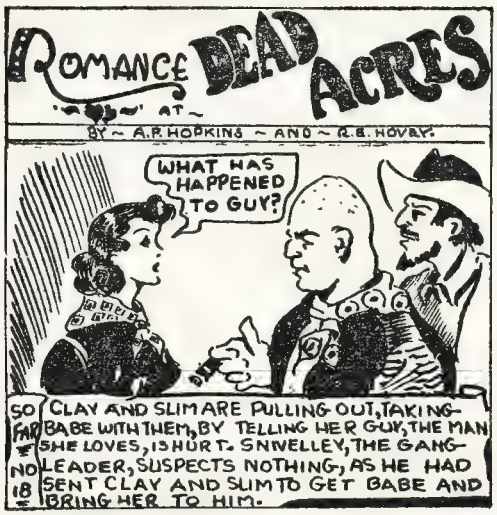
1. A resinous substance
4. To bevel out
8. So be it
12. Belonging to us
13. Talented
14. Interlaced
15. Americans (Mex.)
17. Afresh
18. A kind of cloth
19. To cease
21. To turn for drying
22. Horse breakers
25. Ran swiftly
27. A piece of money
28. Upon
29. Affected manners
30. Very warm
31. A long portico
33. Myself
34. A relative measure
35. To raise water
36. A pledge
39. A prickly seed pod
40. The one and the other
41. To potter
44. Sorrows
46. Something left out
48. Comfort
49. Crazy (Slang)
50. To bow the head
51. The three spot
52. To bewail audibly
53. Printers' measures

Down

1. Cut timber
2. An invisible emanation
3. A dumb beast
4. Stormed
5. Very black
6. A beverage
7. A Western shrub
8. To wait for
9. A gambling game
10. Poetic for evening
11. Not old
16. Necessities
20. The U. S. Navy (Abbr.)
22. Liquor
23. A partitioned space
24. To break short
25. Indian corn
26. A supporting pillar
27. A famous trail
31. Potatoes
32. Belonging to the thrush family
34. To rest on a chair
37. Very fat
38. To move about slowly
39. The buffalo
41. A size of type
42. A weaving machine
43. Finishes
44. Very damp
45. A rowing implement
47. To low, as a cow



Solution to Third November Puzzle


ROMANCE AT DEAD ACRES
BY ~ A.P. HOPKINS ~ AND ~ R.E. HOVEY.
WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO GUY?
SO FAR IN NO 18
CLAY AND SLIM ARE PULLING OUT, TAKING BABE WITH THEM, BY TELLING HER GUY, THE MAN SHE LOVES, IS HURT. SNIVELLEY, THE GANG LEADER, SUSPECTS NOTHING, AS HE HAD SENT CLAY AND SLIM TO GET BABE AND BRING HER TO HIM.

HE AND SNIVELLEY HAD A FIGHT AND GUY IS BUNGED UP A BIT.
HAW- BUT YOU SHOULD SEE WHAT HE DONE TO SNIVELLEY!

OH! - LET'S HURRY!

PUT HER IN THE CAR
I THOUGHT YOU SAID SNIVELLEY WAS HURT? - OH YOU'RE LYING! HELP!

YOU'RE COMIN' WIT US, MY PRETTY BOID - SO, SHUT UP!
AND WE'RE NOT WAITIN' FOR THE BOSS!

THANK GAWD WE'RE OFF, AND WELL RID OF THE BUNCH OF THEM. HEY- YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY!
OH NO, I'M NOT. I'M GOING TO DE CAVE FOR DE JEWELS.
HELP!

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison, New York City, N. Y.

Bachelor Girl

Dear Editor:

I wonder if there is a chance for an old maid to join your big family. I would like a few pen pals, too. I would like to hear from middle-aged people, especially old-time ranchers.

Sincerely,
VERNA BLISS.

Limon, Colo.

A Gold Mine Town

Dear Editor:

I live in a mining district, and can tell many things about the gold mines here. I am a junior in high school, and enjoy all sports and dancing. I would like pen pals between sixteen and twenty, from foreign countries.

Sincerely,
LLOYD POTTER.

Windham, Mont.

"Both Father and Mother"

Dear Editor:

I have traveled all through the midwest, and get lonesome to hear from all points west. I am trying to be both father and mother to my family here on a small farm. I promise to answer letters from young and old all around the world.

Sincerely,
MRS. MARY ROSE HARMON.

R. 2,
Weedsport, N. Y.

Researcher in Texas History

Dear Editor:

I am a researcher in Texas history, working in a large library. During the last two years I have read many interesting true accounts and original documents of the fascinating history of this State—the old Spanish explorers and missions, the hardships of the early settlers, the great ranches, the trail-drivers and the wire-cutters. Pen pals interested in Texas history are invited to write to me.

Sincerely,
ROSS NORTHWAY.

Box 173, U.C.D.,
Austin, Texas

A Full Life!

Dear Editor:

I have traveled around the country quite a bit, and now that I've settled down I would like to travel via letters. I have worked on boats and touched a few foreign ports, have panned gold in Alaska and British Guiana, and have prospected in Canada. I am twenty-one years old, and was born and raised in the West. I promise to answer every letter I receive, and will exchange snapshots.

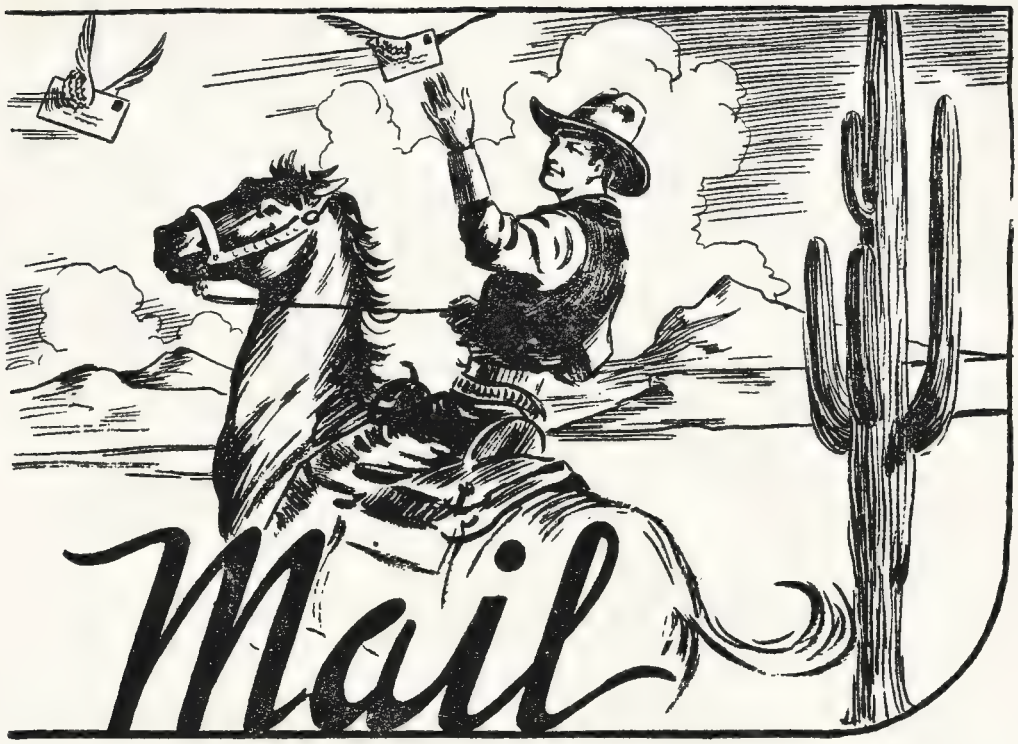
Sincerely,
DICK RANKIN.

N. 919 Ash St.,
Spokane, Wash.

Blue-Eyed Hombres

Dear Editor:

How are chances for a pair of hombres who like



your magazine to get a few pen pards? We are nineteen years old, and both have blue eyes. We'll answer all letters, and will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
JOHN BEAUERS.
CHARLES MARKS.

1606 So. Gallaton,
Marion, Ind.

Little Dutch Matron

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Dutch girl of twenty-nine. All my folks are in Holland, and my husband's folks are in Belgium, so we get very lonesome. I play the piano, and occasionally play in an orchestra. To the writers of the first ten letters I receive, I will send a souvenir.

Sincerely,
BERTHA LOPPE.

Box 136,
Hawthorne, N. J.

She Raises Flowers

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl of sixteen, living on a little ranch in eastern Montana. I have no girl friends within twenty-five miles. My hobbies are horseback riding and raising flowers. I like to read and write, and will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
HELEN W. ANDERSON.

Hodges, Mont.

Strange Collections

Dear Editor.

I'd like very much to hear from pen pals, young and old, all over the world. I am twenty years old, and have been confined to bed for over six years. Some of my hobbies are collecting soap figures, snapshots, postcard folders and pins. I'll do my best to answer all the letters I receive, and will try to make my replies interesting.

Sincerely,
RACHEL IRWIN.

81 Euclid Ave.,
Columbus, Ohio

Turkey Herders and a Cowboy

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely turkey herders and one lonely cowboy. We would like correspondents from far and near, and we promise to answer all letters. Riding is our hobby. Newton is eighteen, Henry is nineteen and Frank is twenty-two.

Sincerely,
NEWTON BLEAK,
HENRY JACKSON,
FRANK HELLEWELL.

Small, Idaho

Michigan Miss

Dear Editor:

I am fourteen years old, have blond hair and blue eyes. I would like to correspond with people around my age, or older.

Sincerely,
BETTY TROIKE.

528 La Salle Ave.,
St. Joseph, Mich.

Tossed from a Horse

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely soldier, with brown eyes and brown hair, twenty-one years old. I am in the hospital at present, for I was thrown from a horse. I'm hoping to hear from people from all parts of the world.

Sincerely,
PAUL E. JACKSON.

Ward 10,
W.B.G.H.,
Fort Bliss, Texas

Lonely Briton

Dear Editor:

I would like to get in touch with some young people who would care to start a pen friendship with a very lonely Briton. I am twenty-one years old, with brown hair and grey eyes.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH H. JOHNSON.

60 Hampton Park,
Redland, Bristol 6,
England

A New Friend

Dear Editor:
I am a country lass of eighteen. My hobby is writing letters, and anyone answering this letter of mine has the promise of a new friend.

Sincerely,
AMY IVARIE.

New Leipzig, N. D.

Pistol Expert

Dear Editor:
I am very lonely, and would like to hear from girls. I am nineteen years old, six feet tall, and am an expert with a pistol.

Sincerely,
PAUL FOREMAN.

11 Cavalry Troop A,
Presidio of Monterey,
Monterey, Calif.

"Toughened Soldier"

Dear Editor:
I am a toughened soldier of the British fighting forces, occupying a lonely desert outpost. I have witnessed and taken part in many skirmishes with Arabs. I can recount grim and bloodcurdling adventures, or tell of the mysticism and exotic romance of the East. Sometimes I get very lonely, and I would like to be able to write to girls who might be interested in the things I have to tell. I am twenty-five years old, and have brown curly hair.

Sincerely,
HARRY E. VARLEY.

3/3 Cavalry Field Ambulance,
Abbassia, Cairo,
Egypt

"Sissy Hobbies"

Dear Editor:
Here am I, calling any pals who would like to write to a girl whose sissy hobbies are collecting movie stars' pictures and crocheting. I am twenty-four years old, and a good correspondent.

Sincerely,
GLADYS WILEY.

609 N. Lyon,
Marshall, Mo.

From Rough and Ready

Dear Editor:
I'd like to have some pen pals—I don't care what race or creed. I'm interested in anything or anybody that is odd or unusual, and I'm pretty unorthodox myself. I'm fifty years old, and an outdoor man.

Sincerely,
H. E. MERRILL.

Rough and Ready,
Calif.

Forest Rangers

Dear Editor:
We are two very lonely forest rangers. At present we are confined here because of extreme fire hazard, so we have plenty of time to write. Phil is twenty-two, and has blond hair and blue eyes. Jimmy is twenty-one, and has brown hair and blue eyes. We will exchange snaps, so come on, girls.

Sincerely,
JIMMY STUART.
PHILLIP DODSON.

Box 67,
Elliott State Forest,
Allegany, Ore.

Southern Married Woman

Dear Editor:
I am twenty-six years old, and have black hair and brown eyes. I've been married for nine years, and get very lonesome during the day. I will exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
MRS. ETHEL M. LUNSFORD.

R. 3,
Guntersville, Ala.

Men of the Sea

Dear Editor:
Here are two lonely fishermen who crave letters from boys and girls interested in men of the sea. Freddie is twenty years old, and has black hair and blue eyes. Sam has auburn hair and blue eyes. Both of us are Scotch-Irish, and can spin some salty yarns. We will send pen pals a snap of our boat and one of ourselves.

Sincerely,
FREDDIE JOHNSON,
SAM SPENCER.

1909½ Santa Monica Blvd.,
Santa Monica, Calif.

"Little Old (?) Lady"

Dear Editor:
I am a little old lady of thirty-seven, and would like to hear from people in the United States, the Canal Zone, Hawaii and Bermuda. I am fond of music, enjoy movies, and like all kinds of sports.

Sincerely,
PEGGY KELLER.

312 N. College St.,
Palmyra, Penna.

Sailor Is Auto Driver

Dear Editor:
I have been reading your magazine for a long time, and have finally mustered up enough courage to ask you to help me obtain correspondents. I am a sailor, lonesome among a thousand other sailors, and would like to correspond with some nice girl. I am a good narrator, enjoy dancing, and am an expert automobile driver.

Sincerely,
CHESTER N. BAILEY.

USS Yorktown,
c/o Postmaster,
New York, N. Y.

A Lot of Territory

Dear Editor:
I am thirteen years old, and have blue-green eyes and blond hair. I would like to have friends, from five to fifty years of age, all over the continent of North America.

Sincerely,
FAYE LE ROY.

R. 1,
Stephenson, Mich.

Story-Writing Canadian

Dear Editor:
I am a lanky Canadian, six feet, one inch tall, and want correspondents from all over the world. My favorite hobby is story writing. Come on, you boys and girls, and you would-be authors—write to a lonesome Canadian.

Sincerely,
JOHN M. URICHUK.

Box 85,
Willingdon, Alta.,
Canada

Musical Farmer

Dear Editor:
I am a lonely farmer of nineteen, and would like pen pals from everywhere who read and like RANCH ROMANCES. I am very fond of music, and play several instruments. I would like to exchange snapshots and songs.

Sincerely,
J. B. TUCKER.

R. 2,
Holly Grove, Ark.

Sport-Loving Schoolgirl

Dear Editor:
I am a lonely schoolgirl of fourteen, fond of all sports. I would like to hear from pen pals in the West and in foreign countries.

Sincerely,
HELEN WONDOWSKY.

44 James St.,
South River, N. J.

Young Western Couple

Dear Editor:
We are a young couple who would like to correspond with other people, especially those living in Washington and Mexico. We would like to exchange snapshots and souvenirs. Our hobbies are numerous, so we can write with interest to all.

Sincerely,
MR. AND MRS. ROBERT W. SHAW.

544 E. Jefferson St.,
Phoenix, Ariz.

Blonde with Many Hobbies

Dear Editor:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl, with blond hair and blue eyes. I have many hobbies, and enjoy all sports. I would like to hear from people all over the world.

Sincerely,
HELEN KOMPICKI.

Box 66,
Andover, N. J.

Got a Sense of Humor?

Dear Editor:

Would some tall person with a sense of humor write to a seventeen-year-old girl in a far-off land? I am five feet, ten inches tall, and have dark hair and grey eyes. I live on a farm, and would like some interesting mail to break the monotony of farm life.

Sincerely,
WINNIE HANNAH.

Te Kohanga,
Via Tuakau,
Auckland, New Zealand

Wandering Prospector

Dear Editor:

I am a wandering prospector, thirty-two years old, and am interested in everything. I would like to hear from people everywhere, especially miners.

Sincerely,
GEORGE R. ALLEMAN.

Picabo, Idaho

Dairy Milker

Dear Editor:

I'm a milker on one of the largest dairies in this part of the country. I have every afternoon off, so have plenty of time to write letters. I am nineteen years old, have brown hair and blue-green eyes, and would like to hear from pen pals around my own age.

Sincerely,
ROBERT SAVAGE.

Jacumba Farms,
Jacumba, Calif.

Little German Miss

Dear Editor:

The Double R. is my favorite magazine and I would like to hear from its other readers. I'm sixteen years old, but small for my age, being one inch short of five feet. My hobbies are drawing, collecting autographs and cowboy songs. My new hobby will be to get some foreign pen pals. Please write to a little German girl.

Sincerely,
NELLIE BIRKHOF.

Box 54,
Sebeka, Minn.

Interested in Psychology

Dear Editor:

I've been cheer-leading for dear old RANCH ROMANCES for the past three years. Now a letter in your magazine will keep my megaphone in tune! Let's have more stories like "Thirsty Acres" and "My First Experience in Texas."

I am twenty-seven years old and enjoy reading. I am interested in psychology and a lot of other "ologies." Can answer you in French or English. Let's hear from all you students and ex-students.

Sincerely,
LAWRENCE (LARRY) LENIHAN.

West Side Bank Bldg.,
Apt. 2,
Scranton, Penna.

Do You Like Bracelets?

Do you want one of the lovely Trail's End bracelets pictured below? On each of these beautiful pieces of jewelry is the insignia of the Trail's End Club, and the bracelet costs only twenty-five cents.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name _____

Street or Route Address _____

City and State _____

Please print your name and address plainly.

Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

12-9-38

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Mr. Walter Alleshouse, R. 3, Dover, Ohio
Mr. F. J. Andres, U. S. Naval Station, Guantanamu Bay, Cuba
Miss Stella Aylor, R. 1, Box 302, Hollister, Calif.
Miss Marie Beausoleil, 120 Orchard St., Elmira, N. Y.
Miss Bobbie Berryhill, Mammoth Lakes, Calif.
Mr. Harvey Bradford, Pecos, Texas
Mr. R. Bryant, North View, Mo.
Miss Alma Byast, Rosebank, Florence Rd., Finsbury Park, London, N. 4, England
Mr. William Cooper, M-40 Feed Store, Dowagiac, Mich.
Mr. Mervin Carvell, 10th Ordnance Service Co., March Field, Riverside, Calif.
Mr. Paul Collins, c/o Redbird Farm, Wrentham, Mass.
Miss Jane Davidson, Paradise, Penna.
Miss Lennie Davis, 106 Center St., Cocoa, Fla.
Mr. Ray Edmonds, 22 Barlto St., Toronto, Ont., Canada
Miss Esther Eisenhauer, 716 Freas Ave., Berwick, Penna.
Miss Maydene Fields, R. 1, Dawson Springs, Ky.
Mr. Charles Fitch, 602 Nolan St., San Antonio, Tex.
Mr. Buck Gafford, Eldorado, Tex.
Mr. John St. George, R. 4, Galesburg, Ill.
Mr. Horace Guerry, 53rd Sqd., Air Corps, Randolph Field, Tex.
Mr. S. Hargrave, Hamilton Sanatorium, Hamilton, Ont., Canada
Mr. Thomas Harris, CCC Co. 1522, Cliffton, W. Va.
Miss Violet Harris, 4 Ave. Terrace, Edward Rd., Cannon Hill, Birmingham, Warickshire, England
Miss Agnes Hartney, 14 Herb Hill Rd., Glen Cove, Long Island, N. Y.
Miss Wenoma Hauseman, Apalachicola, Fla.
Mr. John Henry, Wharf Cottage, Slaithwaite, Nr. Huddersfield, Yorkshire, England
Miss Myrtle Huebsch, 18, Vimy Ridge, Delville, Germiston, Johannesburg, South Africa
Mr. E. Hume, 11A Mount St., Randwick, New South Wales, Australia
Mr. William F. Hall, 81 Eton Grove, Kingsbury, London, N.W. 9, England
Miss Carol Irvine, Woodbourne Ave., Penbroke, Bermuda
Mr. Sidney Jacobs, 31 Mess, H.M.S. Sussex, c/o G.P.O., London, England
Mr. R. A. Jeffery, Tod Inlet P.O., B.C., Canada
Mrs. Bobbie Johnston, Main St., Castlederg Co., Tyrone, Ireland
Miss Sarah Keller, White Cloud, Kans.
Miss Theodora Kimber, R. 3, Henning, Minn.
Miss Evelyn Laney, 4811 Radnor St., Detroit, Mich.
Miss Kitty Lorenzo, Box 48, Cortoro, Ariz.
Mr. Wayne Loury, North 15th St., Memphis, Texas
Mr. Kenneth MacDonald, Duke St., Trenton, N.S., Canada
Miss Pearl MacDonald, Gibson St., Box 544, Parry Sound, Ont., Canada
Mr. Robert MacEwan, Ashludie Sanatorium, Monifeith, Angus, Scotland
Miss June Mann, Freestone, Calif.
Miss Virginia McCartney, Box 186, Saegertown, Penna.
Mr. Isaac McDonough, State Sanatorium, Ark.
Mr. Telford McKee, 107 W. 16th Ave., Lewiston, Idaho
Mr. Johnny McLeod, R. 2, Beamsville, Ont., Canada
Mr. Leon Mertz, 612 Enid St., Houston, Texas
Mr. Gray Moddy, 20 Orange St., Newburyport, Mass.
Mr. Michael Montague, 141 Hutton St., Goatbridge Lanarkshire, Scotland
Miss Thelma Moody, Pilgrim Knob, Va.
Mr. W. F. S. Morean, 100 Victoria Rd., Barrow-in Furness, Lancashire, England
Mr. Robert Nielsen, R. 3, Nampa, Idaho
Mr. Oscar Nolen, R. 2, Waterloo, Ala.
Mr. Alfred Olson, Duncan, B. C., Canada
Mr. Hugh Parkes, 31 Mess, H.M.S. Sussex, c/o G.P.O., London, England
Mr. Kenneth Potts, South African Military College, Roberts Heights, Transvaal, South Africa
Miss Edith Preston, 1 Raglan St., Willenhall, Staffordshire, England
Mr. Reginald Reynolds, 51 Military Rd., Colchester, Essex, England
Mr. Virgil Richardson, Evensdail St., Richmond, Ky.
Miss Beatrice Robertson, Parker, Idaho
Miss Mary Rosso, Box 333, Virginia City, Va.
Miss Jenny Rotundo, R. 1, Seneca Falls, N. Y.
Mr. Vesper Russell, P.O. Box 874, Nassau, Bahamas
Miss Ethel Sauer, Southbury, Conn.
Mr. James Schmoke, P. O. Box 31, Westport, Penna.
Miss Joan Scott, 31 Bondi Road, Waverley, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
Mr. Thomas Scott, Ardrosan P.O., Alta, Canada
Mr. Jay Dee Short, Turnerville, Ga.
Mr. William Slack, York St., Nundah N.E. 3, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
Mr. Arthur Smith, Box 98, Port Arthur, Texas
Mr. Floyd Smith, CCC Co. 1852, Cody, Wyo.
Mr. Gilbert Smith, Co. 5478, CCC Co., Crescent City, Calif.
Miss Myrtle Smith, Box 71, East Dixfield, Me.
Miss Dorothy Stewart, Latchford, Ont., Canada
Miss Laura Stewart, Latchford, Ont., Canada
Miss Ada Waller, 17 Hall St., Wellington, New Zealand
Mr. David Swick, Nutter Fort, W. Va.
Private L. Thorp, HQ. Co., 1st Wilts Reg't., Baird Brks., Bangalore City, Mysore, India

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(Miss)

(Mrs.)

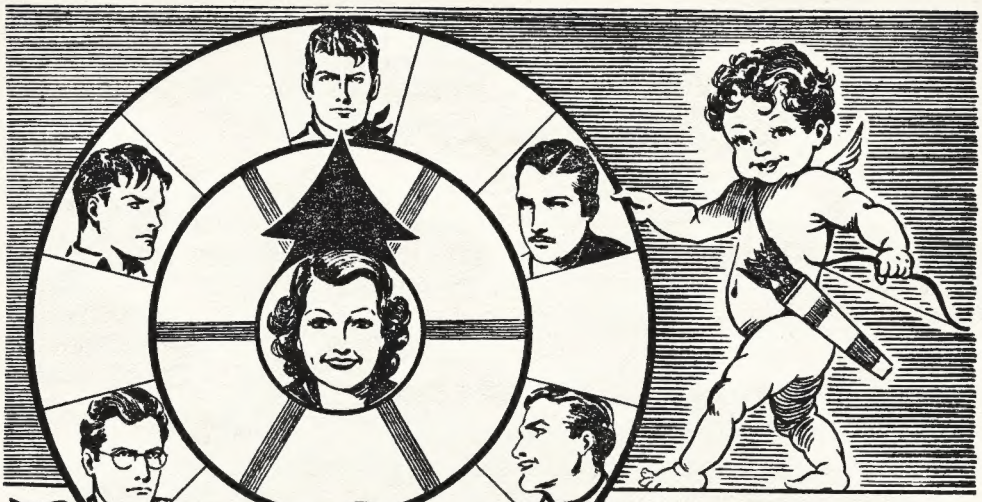
(Mr.)

Address .....

City .....

State .....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.
Please *print* your name and address plainly. 12-9-38



Whom Shall I Marry?

By PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

The Sagittarius Girl

BETWEEN November 23rd and December 22nd, Sagittarius, symbolized by the Archer shooting an arrow high into the sky, is the ruling sign, the ninth of the zodiac.

Activity, both mental and physical, is the chief characteristic of the girl who is born under this influence. She is keenly, vitally alive, and she knows intuitively a secret which to many people is always veiled in mystery, namely, that the principal business of life is living! Her greatest gift is her ability to fill her days to overflowing with the doing of useful and interesting things. She will never lead a dull or simple life, but one full of adventure and crowded with incident.

She is artistic, appreciative of beauty even in its humblest forms; she is a good sportswoman, and excels in outdoor pursuits. Poetry, music, fine prose, architecture, painting—all have a strong appeal for her, and she almost invariably possesses a talent in one or more of these arts.

Intensely loyal, affectionate, generous to a fault, she has, too, a quiet self-confidence which, although it may lead her to express her opinions bluntly, seldom degenerates into arrogance. Her temper may be a bit too quick, but she never harbors a grudge, and her sense of justice and fair play makes her ready with the olive branch if she is shown to be in the wrong on any question.

The Sagittarius girl is not conventional. She refuses to be bound by a set of standards. She should try to remember that one cannot always flout public opinion with impunity.

In marriage this girl should find her most congenial partner in a man born under the sign of Aquarius, Capricorn, or infrequently Scorpio. The people whom she finds most agreeable as friends will probably be those of Aries and Leo. This girl will always have many friends because there is a certain indefinable fascination about her which is irresistible; and those who have once come under her spell will not soon forget its potency.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address .....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date..... 12-9-38

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze men born between November 23rd and December 22nd.

TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS' HERE IN THE COYNE SHOPS

PAY TUITION AFTER GRADUATION

Mail coupon today for details of my "Pay after graduation plan" and famous Coyne "Learn by Doing" method of practical shop training for your start for success in this big-pay field. Age or lack of money need not hold you back . . . Get training first; then take 12 months to complete small monthly tuition payments starting 5 Months after you begin training.

12 WEEKS' TRAINING

Coyne Training is practical, thorough, easy to grasp . . . you learn quickly by doing actual jobs on real electrical machinery right here in my Chicago Training Shops — NOT from books or printed lessons. You don't need previous experience or a lot of book learning. Expert instructors guide you every step of the way.

EARN WHILE LEARNING— JOB HELP AFTER GRADUATION

Big things ahead in Electricity means opportunities for steady jobs, good pay, and a real future in this fascinating "live" industry. Thousands of opportunities. Rush the coupon TODAY for Big Free Book containing many photos of the great Coyne Shops in Chicago, facts about Coyne Training . . . Free Employment Service . . . many earn while learning . . . additional instruction in Diesel Engines, Electric Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning at NO EXTRA COST and amazing Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation Offer.

Learn by Doing

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
H. C. LEWIS, President
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 98-66, Chicago, Ill.

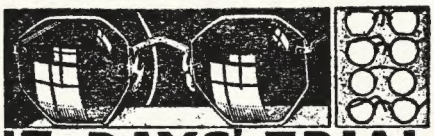
H. C. LEWIS, President, Coyne Electrical School
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 98-66, Chicago, Ill.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Big Free Book and details of Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation-Offer.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____



15 DAYS' TRIAL

SEND ONLY 20 CENTS with name, age and address, and by return mail **RECEIVE** a set of **24 TRIAL GLASSES** to select from to fit your eyes **NOTHING MORE TO PAY** until you can see perfectly far and near. Then the above **Beautiful Style** will cost you only $3.90, no more; other styles $1.95 and up.

We only handle **High Grade** Single Vision and **DOUBLE VISION** or **KRYPTOK BIFOCAL** toric lenses, ground into **ONE SOLID PIECE of GLASS. DOCTOR H. E. BAKER**, O.D., with over 30 years' experience, **GUARANTEES** to give you **Perfect Fit** or **NO COST.** Circular with latest styles and lowest prices **FREE.**

MODERN SPECTACLE CO., Dept. 812-BA
5125 Pensacola Ave., Chicago, Ill.

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once. Get details immediately.

RAYSON SERVICE BUREAU,
B-52, Denver, Colo.

SONG POEMS WANTED AT ONCE

Mother, Home, Love, Patriotic, Sacred, Comic or any subject. Don't delay—send your poem today for immediate consideration.

RICHARD BROS., 27 Woods Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

ROOFLESS PLATES

FILLS A LONG FELT WANT

Order by Mail at Money Saving Prices

FREE Sanitary Wrapped Impression Material and FULL INSTRUCTIONS How to Order By Mail!

MULTITUDES OF PLEASED USERS SAY MY PLATES SAVED THEM MANY DOLLARS—IMPROVE THE APPEARANCE—AIDS YOU WITH YOUR SPEECH

SEND NO MONEY

Just send name and address TODAY. Don't delay.

60 DAYS' TRIAL

Dr. J. S. LIPPERT
Plate Specialist with 33 years' experience
Pres. of Dr. Jos. S. Lippert Dental Lab. Inc.
24 E. Van Buren St., Chicago, Ill.

Dept. 401

Kidneys Must Clean Out Acids

Excess Acids and poisonous wastes in your blood are removed chiefly thru 9 million tiny delicate Kidney tubes or filters. And functional disorders of the Kidneys or Bladder may cause Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Circles Under Eyes, Dizziness, Backache, Swollen Ankles, or Burning Passages. Help your kidneys purify your blood with Cystex. Usually the very first dose starts helping your kidneys clean out excess acids, and this soon may make you feel like new. Under the money-back guarantee Cystex must satisfy completely or cost nothing. Get Cystex (siss-tex) today. Only 3c a dose at druggists. The guarantee protects you.

GARLIC-PARSLEY an Aid in HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Medical reports say that Garlic-Parsley concentrate has a double action in reducing high blood pressure. First, it tends to relax tightened arteries. Second, it checks or inhibits decomposition of waste matter in the bowels, a contributory cause of high blood pressure. To get concentrated garlic and parsley in odorless, tasteless form, ask your druggist for **ALLIMIN** Essence of Garlic-Parsley Tablets. Large box 50c; super-size money-saving package, $1.00. ALLIMIN used repeatedly at regular intervals aids in reducing blood pressure and relieving headache and dizziness caused by excessively high readings. To learn what raises your blood pressure and for medical treatment consult your doctor. For free sample and booklet of valuable information on high blood pressure, write

VAN PATTEN CO., 54 W. Illinois, Dept. 107, Chicago

That MYSTERIOUS Thing Called LUCK

Many people believe that happiness and good fortune are largely a matter of luck, our belief to the contrary notwithstanding. In fact, down through the centuries of time many persons in various walks of life have been carrying a pair of Magnetic LODESTONES as highly regarded "GOOD LUCK" Tokens; one for intangibly attracting "Good Luck" in Love, Games, Business and Money Matters; the other to allegedly drive away so-called Evil, Trouble, Losses, "Bad Luck," etc. We make no supernatural claims but GUARANTEE them to be GENUINE and possessed of extra strong magnetic drawing power. Carry a pair of our Genuine Magnetic LODESTONES as a curio. Sent postpaid for $1 a pair (C. O. D. 15c extra). Money back if not satisfied.

FREE! Big brand new catalog filled with big bargains in jewelry, curios and novelties, free with your order. Mail your order today!

MAJESTIC SALES CO., 6609 Cottage Grove Ave., Dept. 37 AA Chicago, Ill.

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Free Examination. Send Your Poems to
J. CHAS. McNEIL
BACHELOR OF MUSIC
4153-NF, South Van Ness Los Angeles, Calif.

BE A PASSENGER Traffic Inspector

GIVE A FEW WEEKS OF SPARE TIME FOR A WELL-PAID JOB!

Ambitious Men—19 to 50 qualify as *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspectors* by our easy, home-study course. Our graduates are in demand. Upon completion of course, we place you at up to $135 per month, plus expenses to start, *or refund tuition.* Rapid advancement. Get Free Booklet. **STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE, Div. 1312, Buffalo, N. Y.**

How to Run a Big Pay Business From Your Home.

Earnings UP TO $60.00 In a Week!

This wonderful money-making opportunity is open to both men and women, young and old, experienced or inexperienced, able to give full time or just a few hours a week part time. Hundreds of men and women who had never had any business experience before in their lives have made fine cash profits with my simple, sure-fire plan. All I ask is a fair chance to show you how you can make up to $60.00 in a week for full time or up to $35.00 on part time; how you can be your own boss; how you can get a brand-new Ford Tudor Sedan or $500.00 cash as a bonus; and how, in addition to all this, you can get groceries and many other home necessities for your own use at rock-bottom wholesale prices. Let me show you how you can get started without risking a single penny!

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

I'll try to answer here briefly the questions you may have in mind about this wonderful chance to make good money. Then, I know you'll want to mail the coupon below to get the full free details about my unusual offer to you.

FROM ONE SMALL ROOM TO A MILLION DOLLAR PLANT!

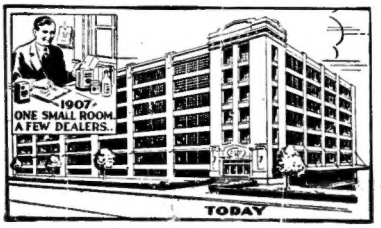
First—something about the big, substantial company that is making this offer to you. More than 30 years ago, I started in one small room with a mere handful of nearby dealers. Today this business has grown to a great million dollar plant, and a mighty organization of thousands of dealers located throughout the nation. The free book and other printed matter I'll send you will tell you the complete, fascinating story of the amazing growth of this business, which is due to the sound idea behind it.

BIRTH OF A GREAT IDEA

That idea was simply—to supply housewives direct, through authorized local dealers, with daily home necessities such as Coffee, Teas, Spices, Extracts and other grocery products, Kitchen and Laundry Supplies, Home Medicines and Toilet Articles—over 250 products that housewives must buy; and to supply these products factory fresh and in the best quality obtainable. By eliminating costly distribution through many middlemen, these local dealers are able to offer highest quality at attractive prices and still make a fine profit on every order they take. To help dealers enjoy big business and big earnings throughout the year. I furnish them constantly with attractive bargain offers of all kinds for their customers—premiums, one cent sales, free product deals, etc., that simply shut out competition!

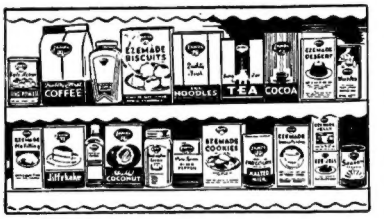
$129.00 IN A WEEK!

With such a splendid, money-making proposition, it is no wonder that Norman Geisler, of Michigan, was able to report clear profits of $129.00 in one week; that Mrs. H. H. Hosick, of Nebraska, reported $41.73 her very first week; that W. J. Way, of Kansas, with us 9 years, reported $19.10 in one day! For many of my dealers this wonderful opportunity has proved a Godsend! Adolph Pickney, of New York, who had never taken an order in his life, reported $60.00 in a week, just working evenings! When Hans Coordes, of Nebraska, started with me, he was penniless; 6½ months later he wrote me: "Today I am worth a little more than $1,200!" These exceptionally fine earnings show your possibilities!



NONE OF THE USUAL EXPENSES

Think of all the advantages you will enjoy as a local dealer for my line, compared with any storekeeper in your locality. While the profit opportunities are as great, or even greater, you won't have the usual worries and expenses of the storekeeper—such as store rent, clerk hire, light and heat bills, big investments in store fixtures and large stocks of goods. Your home is your headquarters.



NO FINER LINE IN AMERICA

For uniform high quality, real values and tempting eye appeal, it can be said truthfully that the line of 250 products you will handle stands unsurpassed. On the market for more than 30 years, these products are nationally famous and have millions of loyal users and boosters. You will have delightfully appetizing Pure Food Products—always fresh—such as Coffee, Teas, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, delicious time-saving preparations for Pies and Puddings, Household Necessities such as Soaps, Shampoos, Tooth Paste, Shaving Cream, Polishes, Cleansers, etc.; also Home Medicines and many more products. Every package and container is so tempting, and so plainly bears the stamp of quality, that the products practically sell themselves.

I'LL FINANCE YOU

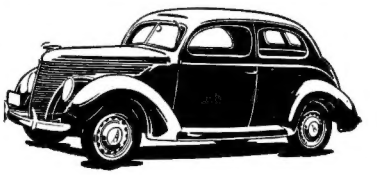
Through my liberal credit plan, once you start, you can do business on my capital. Under this plan, I'll ship your orders on credit, give you ample time to make deliveries to your customers, pocket your own profits and only then pay me my share of the money!

PART-TIME PROFITS

I number among my dealers many housewives, teachers, ministers, farmers and others who devote only their part time. Many dealers started on part time and then found the business so profitable that they gave up their regular occupations to devote full time to this splendid business in which they are their own boss!

TRY MY PLAN FOR 30 DAYS W.THOUT RISKING A CENT

Under my plan, without your risking a penny you can live the life of a local authorized dealer, pick up orders from housewives in your neighborhood and pocket the large cash profits. You will have 30 days to prove to yourself how thrilling it is to make big money, be your own boss, free and independent. If you are not entirely satisfied with the business and its money-making possibilities, I guarantee that you won't be out a penny!



FORDS GIVEN AS BONUS

Loyal, producing dealers are given, as a bonus, a brand-new Ford Tudor Sedan. Or if they already have a car, they are given a cash bonus of $500.00. This bonus is awarded over and above their own cash earnings. Think what a brand-new Ford car would mean to you for both business and pleasure. Or, if you prefer the cash that $500.00 bonus amounts to nearly $10.00 extra cash each week for a whole year. I have already given hundreds of my dealers this big bonus of a Ford car, or $500.00 cash, and I expect to give it to hundreds more. Why should not one of those dealers be you?

AMAZING MONEY-MAKING OUTFIT

The big Display Outfit that I send you is so complete, so attractive, and such a big help, that you will be amazed to see how simple it is to make money in this fascinating business of your own. This Outfit contains a large assortment of full-size packages of the most popular products in the line—also my simple, "sure-fire" Dealer Plan which you can so easily follow that you need no previous experience or special training. You will also receive free samples and advertising matter to give away; and a big, beautifully illustrated Display Catalog which pictures and describes in a most tempting way every one of the more than 250 quality products in the line. Merely showing housewives this catalog has brought many big orders and fine cash profits!

SEND FOR FREE FACTS

By all means send for my complete free facts that tell everything you want to know: all about our great nation-wide organization; all about our pure food kitchens and laboratories; all about our up-to-the-minute manufacturing and selling methods. Then you can also read the letters from other men and women, just like yourself, who took hold of this wonderful business and have since reported splendid earnings that surprised even themselves! When you've read these letters, you'll say: "If others can do so much, why can't I?" Don't miss this wonderful opportunity to make a fine income and be your own boss. Get the free facts. Mail the coupon now.

ALBERT MILLS, President

6503 Monmouth Avenue **Cincinnati, Ohio**

MAIL TODAY FOR FREE FACTS

MR. ALBERT MILLS, President
6503 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Without placing me under any obligation, please send me at once full free facts about how you'll help me own and operate a money-making agency for your nationally known products. Show me how I can make up to $60.00 in a week, and also send me details of your bonus offer of a new Ford Sedan or $500.00 Cash.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Your tired nerves need frequent relief

SCOTTIE
Known variously in early history as Skye, Highland, Cairn, and Scots terrier. Nicknamed the "die-hard" for stout heart.

He's giving his nerves a rest...

and so is he

Copyright, 1938, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., Winston-Salem, N. C.

LIKE humans, dogs have a complicated, highly developed set of nerves. But dogs are kinder to their nerves than we are. They rest when they need rest...while we plunge ahead with our hurry and worry —straining our nerves to keep up with the fast pace. We can't turn back to the natural life of an animal, but we *can* soothe and rest our nerves. Camel cigarettes can be your pleasant reminder to take a helpful breathing spell. Smokers find Camel's costlier tobaccos are mild, delightfully soothing—*soothing*—to the nerves.

Successful people advise

"Let up...*light up a Camel*"

RALPH GULDAHL (above), U.S. Open golf champion, reveals an "inside" story. "I've learned to ease up now and again—to let up . . . and light up a Camel. Little breaks in daily nerve tension help to keep a fellow on top. Smoking a Camel is actually *soothing* to my nerves!"

Smoke 6 packs of Camels and find out why they are the LARGEST-SELLING CIGARETTE IN AMERICA

LET UP—*LIGHT UP A CAMEL!*

Smokers find Camel's Costlier Tobaccos are Soothing to the Nerves